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INTRODUCTION

Fit bodies, strong races, modern nations

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ABSTRACT

The Introductory Essay places the articles collected in the dossier within current debates on race, gender and nation. First, it examines the notion of “Latin” eugenics, both as a non-hereditarian approach to race improvement and a form of Fascist cultural diplomacy based on the export of Italian racial knowledge. Second, it explores the way in which the visual representation of women’s bodies shaped the “eugenics gaze” of an idealized racial nation, as well as her racial “others”. Third, it analyses the racialization of immigration by looking at how dominant groups established eugenics preferences for certain foreigners based on popular assumptions of moral worth and physical strength.

Keywords

Latin eugenics; race; science; nation; women; immigration; physical culture

At the 1995 United Nations Women’s Conference of Beijing Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori announced that he would liberalize Peru’s strict laws on contraception by allowing women to have their tubes tied without getting their husbands’ permission. Local feminist organizations celebrated the announcement as a victory in their struggle to secure reproductive rights for Peruvian women. However, the actual implementation and repercussions of the government’s “Voluntary Surgical Contraception Program” tarnished what had initially seemed a socially progressive measure. In the five following years human rights activists claimed that 300,000 women and over 20,000 men were sterilized under various forms of coercion – or conditions which did not guarantee that they had understood the implications of the surgical procedure. Almost all of the sterilized were poor, had indigenous backgrounds, and did not speak Spanish but the quechua and aimara native tongues. Given the direct relationship between social status and ethnicity in countries with large native populations, such as Peru, it would have been difficult for any policy aimed at reducing the number of births of the impoverished strata of the population not to be perceived as racially biased. However, what makes this episode a singular case in the post 1945 history of race and eugenics was the top-down, compulsive methods used by social workers, medical staff and state officials to curb the reproductive capacity of racial others.

Ethnic-based hierarchies and perceptions of social worth resurfaced more recently when speaking at the World Economic Forum of Davos in January 2018, Argentine President Mauricio Macri declared that “in South America we are all descendants of Europeans.” Such a bold statement not only was intended to woo European investors by showing that South America’s historical and cultural ties with its former colonial masters would hopefully speed the signing of a free-trade agreement between the
European Union and the Mercosur – the regional bloc formed by Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela. Far from just the untimely *faux pas* of an ambitious businessman and shrewd politician, Macri’s words expressed ideas and clichés widely held among his fellow citizens, many of whom still perceive Argentina as a white society grafted onto a racially hybrid continent. The bitter reactions elicited by a speech that ignored the complex history and ethnic makeup of the continent placed the President’s *boutade* in the larger context of an escalating conflict over land rights which, on both sides of the Andes, pitted the Argentine and Chilean governments against native peoples. The fact that the conflict involved some of the most socially exclusive touristic destinations triggered a cascade of racist commentaries denying indigenous communities their constitutional rights and accusing them of plotting the secession of the picturesque Andean districts of northern Patagonia. These examples are anything but exceptional. In the last two decades highly publicized research projects aimed at establishing national and genetic profiles, such as the “Mexican Genoma” and the “Homo Brasilis,” show the central role that racial and biological criteria continue to play in the construction of social identities (Kent et al. 2015).

The articles collected in the present dossier place current debates on race, gender and nation in a longer-term, historical perspective. In particular, they shed further light on the region’s eugenic histories, thus making valuable additions to an expanding body of literature. In the closing paragraphs of her pioneering study on Latin American eugenics, published almost three decades ago, Nancy Leys Stepan warned against any simple reductionism or essentialism in the history of science (Stepan 1991, 201). Before her Thomas Glick’s work on the reception of Darwin, Freud and Einstein in different countries had already raised fundamental questions “about what is to count as normative in science.”(Glick 1987; Glick et al. 2001) Stepan’s book challenged a historiographical consensus that saw Great Britain, the United States, Germany and Scandinavia as the geographical “core” of eugenics. She also broadened our understanding of eugenics beyond sterilization, euthanasia and racially based restrictions on immigration to more moderate policies of population improvement, such as matrimonial counseling and childcare. By stressing that – as Glick had demonstrated with regards to biology, psychology and physics – the reception of European and US population debates was adapted and reconfigured to Latin America’s social and political specificities, Stepan put the region on the world map of eugenics. More importantly, her work paved the path for a spatial des-centering that allowed for the inclusion of Europe’s “peripheries” as well as a re-conceptualization of eugenics along intellectual and scientific traditions other than the strict adherence to Social Darwinism and Mendelian theories of inheritance (Rodriguez 2011).

**Science, culture and “Latin” eugenics**

One of Stepan’s conceptual innovations was the notion of “Latin eugenics,” a term that identified a specific cultural and national space in which measures of race betterment aimed at improving the environment took primacy over those that sought to modify an individual’s biological makeup. She found a strong correlation between the first approach and the eugenic histories of Latin America and Catholic Europe (Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, Romania, and Belgium), both of which shared an ethnic, religious, and linguistic matrix. Stepan took this term from the Fédération Internationale Latine
d’Eugénique, a short-lived organization set up in Mexico in 1935 – it convened only once in Paris two years later. The idea of a transnational body that would serve as a guide for the scientific management of the population in countries that rejected the hereditarian hardline adopted by other international forums – dominated first by British and later US eugenicists – originated in two prominent Italian scientists, the statistician Corrado Gini and the physician Nicola Pende. Both sought to bolster the world prestige of Italian science, and through it Mussolini’s diplomacy, and developed strong personal ties with Latin American population experts – Gini in Mexico, Pende in Argentina (Beccalossi 2018; Berlivet 2016; Turda and Gillette 2014; Reggiani 2010; Scarzanella 2010, 2006).

Each followed a strategy based upon slightly different understandings of latinità. Pende seems to have been the first to use this term as a catchword for the spiritual or humanistic worldview that bound romance-speaking Catholic nations. His sense of a “Latin” identity was grounded in an idealized view of the Italian Renaissance and had strong anti-German(ic) undertones, a trait that needs to be understood in the context of the rift between Rome and Berlin following the failed Nazi coup in Austria. Yet Pende’s international reputation owed less to his culturalist-identitarian battle cry to defend ancient western traditions than his research on endocrinology. Here is where Stepan’s distinction between eugenics as a social reform movement and eugenics as a scientific method becomes a useful analytical resource. Pende’s scientific work on glandular functions and human constitution gave the new discipline of biotypology a certain amount of international prestige. Gini invested as much energy as Pende in building a transnational network to counteract the hegemonic influence of hereditarian and racist eugenics within the International Federation of Eugenic Organizations and world population congresses. But it was his “cyclical theory” of demographic change – which held that cross-breeding had reinvigorating effects on a declining or “aging” population –; his acceptance of race-mixing – provided that it involved “assimilable,” that is, not too different, ethnic groups –, and his endorsement of moderate measures of population betterment – or “restorative eugenics” (eugenia rinnovatrice) – that made him a respectable intellectual reference in Latin Europe and Ibero-America (Cassata 2006, 144–88).

Stepan also made a significant contribution to the historiography of eugenics by placing gender on an equal footing with race and nation. Her notion of “matrimonial eugenics” captures well the strategic place of women’s role as reproducers of a strong nation. The efforts of social reformers to protect the health of the future mother and the child resulted in a series of measures aimed at ensuring that marital relations would serve the larger goal of improving the race – by fighting sexually transmitted diseases; promoting sexual education, and empowering medical professionals to deny permission to marry. The intersection of gender with race and nation made clear the subaltern place of women in patriarchal societies such as those of Southern Europe and Latin America; yet, as Micaela Pattison shows in her essay on eugenics and the modern woman in Spain, it also highlights the extent to which female sexual reformers, such as Hildegart Rodriguez, embraced eugenics as a means to improve women’s conditions. In other words, eugenics worked both ways: it reinforced gender stereotypes by insisting on women’s duties as reproducers and care-givers; at the same time, it empowered them – theoretically at least – to make more informed decisions regarding their body by making sexual knowledge more accessible (Reggiani 2016).
Visual culture and the eugenic gaze

Women also played a prominent role in eugenics ideology as visual representations of the race. Building upon George Mosse’s investigations on the construction of ideals of masculinity and femininity historians have demonstrated the importance of the body as a means of “physicallizing modernity,” to use Karl Toepfer’s words, as well the central focus of what Pattison in her article calls the “modernist compulsion to typify.” (Toepfer 1997; Mosse 1996. See also Crozier 2014; Sappol and Rice 2014; Aldersey-Williams 2013; Corbin 2011, 2005; Courtine 2011, 2006; Nye 2005; Vigarello 2004, 2001; Hau 2003). Her analysis shows how Spanish popular culture in the 1920s and 1930s was “marked by the production of new typologies of modern femininity,” of which the “eugenic biologisation of identity” was one of various taxonomical strategies geared towards national regeneration. The “explosion of types and typologies of modern identity,” she argues, was the outcome of the “splitting, standardizing, and calibrating of data” produced by science, bureaucracy, and government. The diversification of women’s roles that resulted from the modernization of Spanish society encouraged a classification based on their nonconventional “appearance, presentation of self, and performance of functions beyond those of the dutiful daughter or wife.” In the “visual conditions of modernity” facilitated by the technological breakthroughs in communication and image production new female urban types – fashion models, university women, automobile drivers, seamstresses, etc. – became “synecdoches of modernity,” or put more simply, images of a modern femininity – girl or woman – everywhere to be seen in the streets of Madrid and Barcelona.

The theme of visual culture is taken up in Ana Carolina Vimieiro Gomes and André Luiz dos Santos Silva’s article on Brazilian biotypology. Their analysis of representations of the female body in books and textbooks of the 1930s and 1940s examines the process by which experts in anthropometry and biometry – two of the most important methods of body calibration used by biotypologists – established patterns of normality and deviance based on a combination of aesthetic ideals of classical Antiquity and Brazilian racial profiles. As Stepan had established, and subsequent research has confirmed, most of the conceptual vocabulary of Brazilian biotypology came from the Italian school of constitutional medicine. Italian models, the authors argue, “were valued not only for their epistemological concepts and theoretical guidelines for medicine but also for their applicability and the supposed scientific precision of their parameters for classifying bodies into ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal.’” Giacinto Viola, Mario Barbàra and Nicola Pende furnished the methodological toolkit which allowed Brazilian experts in legal medicine, psychiatry, education and physical culture to make sense of constitutional variations through taxonomical constructions.

One of the innovative aspects of Vimieiro Gomes and Dos Santos Silva’s work is the analysis of the relationship between biotypology and physical culture. It was only recently that historians began to pay attention to the converging agendas of eugenics and physical exercise (Reggiani 2018; Hoberman 2002). In the 1930s and 1940s gymnastics and sports became popular practices to keep “a sound mind in a sound body” as well as venues for gathering data on human constitution and performance. The focus on physical exercise sheds light on the institutional and technological changes that made places such as the schools of physical education of Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro early laboratories of taxonomical experimentation. The anatomical measurements and body images produced by civilian and military experts in exercise science furnished the statistical and visual references that were supposed
to guide the Brazilian woman in her quest for beauty, harmony and perfection. The importance of body kinetics for biotypologists was both “regenerative” and “evaluative.” (Levine and Bashford 2010, 3) On the one hand, it was a means for instilling in the population healthy and useful habits. Exercising helped maintain good health, a vigorous body and a clear mind. Gymnastics and modern sports also helped develop goal-oriented abilities deemed useful in modern life, such as attention, discipline, and team-work. On the other, physical culture offered scientists the possibility of studying and enhancing human capacities. Exercise physiologists had been measuring athletic performance since the late nineteenth century; for biotypologists, however, this knowledge had much larger, and political, implications: generating the empirical data necessary for constructing classificatory systems into which virtually every citizen could be included was the key for a “scientific” organization of society.

The intertwinement of race and nation is also examined in Sarah Walsh’s essay on nationalism and ethnic identity in early twentieth-century Chile. She argues that the supremacist idea of a racially homogeneous Chilean nation postulated by intellectuals and physicians relied on ahistorical notions of ancestral cross-breeding between native Mapuches and Germanic immigrants. Such invented pasts were coupled with the rejection of immigration, especially from Asia, whose population was considered inferior and non-assimilable. The claim of eugenic nationalists that the “true Chilean” was the product of an earlier race-mixing is a timely reminder of the ambiguous meanings that notions such as “race” had in multiethnic societies undergoing rapid change. Walsh makes this conceptual ambivalence all the more clear when she examines the role of visual culture in the racialization of women’s bodies. She shows how photographs contributed to popularize both the physical features that passed as “Chileanness” and a racialized representation of the mestizo as “white.” (Maxwell 2008; Green 1984). By contrasting foreign women in typical costumes to “true Chileans” in Western fashion visual images circulated in magazines and popular journals emphasized the beauty of “Chilean whiteness” over the “exoticism and racial inferiority” of women from India, Japan, Africa and the Middle East. Walsh concludes that Chilean racial thought was fraught with contradiction: on the one hand, the idea of a unique Chilean race made necessary the acceptance of miscegenation while, on the other, it rendered indigenous peoples invisible “just as it marginalized non-western foreigners.”

Racializing the immigrant

The rise of eugenics coincided with a period of massive global population movements. In the receiving countries the arrival of large contingents of foreigners in a brief period of time triggered intense debates over the benefits and perils of immigration. The articles by Diego Armus and Richard Cleminson examine some of the responses to overseas and cross-border migration in Buenos Aires and Catalonia in the first decades of the twentieth century. Armus’s essay on tuberculosis and race highlights how concerns over the spread of contagious diseases were used to underpin racial hierarchies. High mortality and morbidity rates due to the disease among indigenous people served to confirm older western prejudices regarding their inferiority and unfitness for civilized life. Interestingly, far from being limited to ethnic “others” racial assessments based on sanitary conditions were also applied to Europeans to distinguish between more or less desirable groups. Taking the example of Spanish immigrants in Argentina’s capital,
Armus argues that perceptions of Galicians as more disease-prone compared to the healthy and vigorous Basques were based, on the one hand, on past stereotypes that made the latter the cradle of the country’s ruling elite; and on the other, on increasing circulation of medical reports from Spain regarding the poor health of the Galicians. Tuberculosis thus became the criteria for establishing different shades of “whiteness,” to borrow from Matthew F. Jacobson’s book (Jacobson 1999).

Armus partakes in the historiographical consensus that makes immigration the central issue in the history of race and eugenics in Argentina. Although the country’s founding fathers had favored repopulating the territory with northern Europeans it was Italians and Spanish that ultimately made up the largest majority of the eight million who arrived between 1880 and 1930 – half of whom settled permanently. Such massive flow of newcomers led to occasional episodes of xenophobia, either in the form of legislation that empowered the authorities to expel foreign-born trouble-makers – the Social Defense Law of 1902 – or as anti-immigrant and anti-Semitic outbursts – the “Semana Trágica” of 1919. After the First World War, with the first arrivals of smaller “exotic” contingents of Jews and Arabs from eastern Europe and the Middle East, ethnocultural preferences shifted openly in favor of immigrants from “Latin” Europe, whom the elite believed would be more easily assimilated into, and reinforce Argentina’s “Hispano-Italic matrix.” Voiced by experts, propagandists, and politicians, these preferences, however, never translated into a new immigration law.

Unlike Cuba and the United States the trace of hard eugenics is more difficult to find in Argentina’s immigration history. As Armus’s tells us, attempts to amend the principle of the “open door” policy that lawmakers had enshrined in the 1853 Constitution, and replace it with more stringent admission criteria, all but failed to pass into legislation. Accordingly, racial screening shifted from the lawmakers in ministries and parliament to the arbitrariness of consular personnel on the ground. Moreover, we shall recall that one of the founding acts of modern Argentina, namely the military occupation of Patagonia (1879–1883), had been based on strategic as well as racial calculations: preventing Chilean claims over the vast stretches of land south of the Colorado River and replacing indigenous “barbarism” with “civilized” homesteaders. In fact, according to Armus the annihilation of native Argentinians during the “Conquista del Desierto” stands out as the only case of “negative eugenics.” He argues that this episode was at odds with discourses and practices that were “generally more enthusiastic about eugenicist strategies of improvement or incorporation of foreign immigrants than about the violent extermination of undesirables or the unfit.” It goes without saying that the idea of incorporating, assimilating and improving “did not apply to natives who, by and large became the main target of an exterminating agenda and a clear evidence of a negative eugenics demographic policy.”

The fitness of the Spanish population was a matter of concern not only in Argentina but also in Spain itself. The “Disaster of 1898” – the loss of the last shreds of the overseas empire in the war against the United States – triggered a soul-searching debate on the causes of the country’s long decline; it also set in motion the social and political changes that would lead to the fall of the monarchy three decades later. The sense of crisis extended well beyond the international arena; it encompassed the very definition of Spain as a nation at a time when local identities were (re)gaining new ground. One such case was Catalonia, one of Spain’s most culturally distinct regions and, together with the Basque country and the capital, her most prosperous economic center. By the 1930s the
increasing numbers of migrants moving into Catalan industrial districts from poorer neighboring regions, coupled with the fall of the birthrate, ignited fears that “autochthonous Catalans would become a minority.” Together with widespread birth control practices, flows of racially “inferior” migrants from the sub-Levantine regions – such as Almería and Murcia – were perceived as threats to the “genetic capacity” of the Catalan population. The alarmist forecast of an impending “de-Catalanization” found its clearest expression in “the 1934 Manifest for the Preservation of the Catalan Race”.

Cleminson explores the intertwining of demographic changes and the political upheavals of the 1930s – the coming of the Second Republic – as the fertile ground that bred the short-lived Catalan Eugenics Society (1935–1937). Although the outbreak of the Civil War; the crushing of local autonomy, and the imposition of Franco’s dictatorship shut off any further discussion of eugenics, Cleminson’s focus on Catalan demographer Josep Vandellós confirms, once again, the wide circulation and ambivalent meanings of “race.” As in other national contexts, he shows not only the coexistence of various strands of eugenic thinking – progressive or reactionary – but also significant shifts within a same strand. In fact, he portrays the Catalan Eugenics Society as a “broad church” in which those who espoused “the most conservative, alarmist and pro-natalist” views – such as Hermenegildo Puig i Sais – coexisted with others who accepted “some aspects of both Lamarckian and Mendelian theories of inheritance” – Vandellós himself. Cleminson’s essay makes a significant addition to the historiography by showing the role of eugenics in constructing “racial others” within the same nation (Spain) and region (Catalonia). By examining the influence of Oswald Spengler, Corrado Gini, René Martial and Georges Montandon, among others, the essay also recaptures the transnational dimension and intellectual eclecticism of Catalan thinking. It is in its approach to racial miscegenation that Cleminson sees the “main fault-line” within different strands of racial thought and the “supreme flexibility of […] Latin eugenics.”

As a whole the essays make clear two main aspects of the eugenic histories of Latin America and Spain: first, the wide circulation and various meanings of race, itself a phenomenon connected to an eclectic appropriation and revision of transnational race knowledge, and its adaptation to local conditions; second, the gap between the circulation of extreme proposals of population betterment – notably the sterilization of the “unfit” and the rejection of “undesirable” foreigners – and the inability of its promoters to have them legally enforced. In addition to the very problem of defining race with precision, several other reasons have been given for this, among others, a Catholic culture opposed to any violation of the Biblical mandate to reproduce; a state too weak and elites too divided to enforce controversial measures, and the discrediting of radical eugenics by Nazi policies. Armus raises the issue of the “gap” between discourse and practice as a timely reminder not to take written words for actual events. Nor, as Edward Ross Dickinson has rightly warned, should similarities between specific eugenic measures erase the fundamental differences of the political contexts in which they were implemented (Dickinson 2004). And yet, even without going as far as to argue that language creates reality it is a fact that words and images affect the way we see and experience the world regardless of whether they become state-sanctioned or legally binding decisions. The current exhibition at the German Museum of Hygiene, “The Invention of Human Races,” shows how since the eighteenth-century racial stereotypes evolved into a pictorial and written common sensical knowledge that shaped
social and ethnic interactions (Deutsches Hygiene Museum 2018). Few examples illustrate this better than the century-old aphorism “like begets like.

**Looking ahead**

Most of the literature on eugenics has so far followed a top-down analytical perspective that privileges the elite and articulate discourses embodied in legislation, public institutions, expert networks, and the like. But what about the reception of and responses to the biopolitics of race improvement? Reorienting the conventional analytical path towards a “micro-history” of eugenics may shed further light on how people internalized, made sense of, and acted upon discourses of race betterment in their daily lives. For example, to what extent did individuals – prospective husbands and wives, parents of schoolchildren, professional athletes – accept or resist strategies to screen their biological and psychological fitness? Besides their contribution to making information more accessible to a wider public, how did audiences and readers react to recipes for staying healthy and self-help advice circulated by radio broadcasts and popular medicine journals? In other words, how was eugenics appropriated and resignified by those to whom it was aimed?

A good example of this kind of approach is Susan Currell and Christina Cordell’s discussion of eugenics and American mass culture (Currell and Cogdell 2006). The different contributions to their finely edited volume make clear the extent to which the imperative of “national efficiency” – the keyword here is “streamlining” – underpinned and helped promote eugenics at various levels in Depression-era US. Jerry D’Avila’s study of school policy in interwar Brazil is another case in point (D’Avila 2003). He shows how a reformist elite of bureaucrats, pedagogues, and sociologists turned the public school system of Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo into eugenics laboratories for the construction of the Brazilian “New Man.” By subjecting schoolchildren to a battery of anthropometric, physiological and psychological tests experts sought to identify and measure the causes and effects of degeneration; at the same time, they thrust children with the task of monitoring their classmates’ cleanliness and propriety by setting up “health platoons” (pelotão de saúde). Reformist advocates of the “New School” also promoted new criteria for the recruitment and training of teachers with the aim of turning them into professional and modern elite imbued with a strong corporatist ethos. The racial outcome – and implicit purpose – of these changes was the “whitening” of the teacher corps, a process that entailed the substitution of white middle class, female teachers for lower class, male instructors of African descent.

Recent work on gender and the body also reveals the ways in which eugenics permeated different social mileus. Although most forms of gymnastics and systems of physical exercise appeared long before eugenics the human ravages of World War I brought them on the same wavelength. Soon eugenics language – clichés, analogies and metaphors – took over the semantics of bodily fitness, likening individual strength with national or racial vigor (Tumblety 2012). If, as Toepfler and Michael Hau have argued, shaping a well-proportioned, moderately muscled and lean body through physical exercise became a distinctive way of being modern – of “physicalizing” modernity through the fit body, as Toepfler puts it – how was this self-imposed imperative related to collective concerns over rationalization and performance? (Toepfer 1997; Hau 2003, 2008). To take an example closer to our subject, to what extent did the Latin
American followers of the avant-garde schools of female gymnastics accept the principle according to which a functional and/or aesthetic kinetics – a practical and beautiful handling of the body – was the precondition for the political emancipation of women? (Reggiani and Scharagrodsky 2017). As the reader will see some of the essays in this volume address or hint at these questions. We hope that others will follow in their tracks and, more importantly, will chart new ground.

As it often happens current affairs may boost our research and make it more relevant outside the small niche of experts. Shortly before this volume was sent to the publishers Jair Bolsonaro was inaugurated as President of Brazil. For the first time since her independence, the largest country and economy of Latin America elected to the highest office a politician who openly endorses a visceral form of elitism, racism and sexism. Sadly enough, as the election of Trump and the ascendancy of xenophobic racism in Europe show, what has happened in Brazil seems to be part of a much larger trend, which makes all the more urgent to think about the historical resilience of race and its surprising capacity to take, or regain, unpredictable hold in the contemporary world.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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