

Unit 12 - Biopolitics and Eugenics – Determining Factors in a Nation's Governing Reading

1. Introduction

At the very beginning we will have a look at the way the lecture is structured and then develop each section on the topic announced. The lecture is split into four sections.

In the first section, we will examine how the restructuring of Romania's map, in a new international political context and the need of revamping its governance after WWI gave way to questionable ideologies.

The second section centres on eugenic sterilisation.

The third section reviews women's role at various stages of the Romanian's society in accordance with the national political strategies closely related to international developments.

The fourth section reflects upon the Romanian decree passed in '66 concerning abortion laws and its impact.

Last, but not least, we would like to note that several terms, which are no longer deemed appropriate to use in medical practice or in any social context will appear in this lecture, such as 'tarred' and 'tarnished', while in the quotes from older texts we will meet words such as 'barbarians' and 'highly civilised people'.

They are used—sparingly—in this lecture to remain faithful to the historical content of the lecture. In doing so, not only will the development of ideas and practices regarding eugenics be highlighted, but the changes in the way that we discuss those ideas and practices.

This lecture examines the long term impact of biopolitics and eugenics in the historical and political context of the 20th century, with more details on the situation in Romania. Biopolitics is a concept defined as the calculus of costs and benefits through which the biological capacities of a population are optimally managed. In other words, a country's demographics is taken into consideration as an economic tool in order to enhance a nation's potential, while also perceived as a decisive factor in a country's government policy. In this context of pondering the strategies and mechanisms through which human life processes are managed under various regimes, biopolitics introduces a new justification to ending someone's life which is 'protecting society as a whole and preserving the social body's health'. In other words it gives grounds to the practice of eugenics. At the same time it is known that one of the oldest desires of humans is to reach perfection. In various times in history, societies tried to achieve this through methods specific to their culture (religion, marital traditions, politics), for example Sir Francis Galton analyses marriage in different parts of the world and the way in which it led to eugenics. In his study published in 1909, Sir Francis Galton stated 'to this end, a brief history will be given of a few widely spread customs. It will be seen that with



scant exceptions they are based on social expediency, and not on natural instincts. Each of the following paragraphs might have been expanded into a long chapter had that seemed necessary.

(Essays on Eugenics, Sir Francis Galton).

Nowadays the question specialists have to ask themselves and which Prof. Marius Turda answered in his interview is: there are many scientific methods which could lead to the creation of superpeople, but we have to ask ourselves if this is desirable or not. Along the history, mankind always aspired to reaching „man’s best version”, according to each ideological current of a specific era. For example „The New Man” specific to the communist period in Romania, „the superior race” during the Nazi Germany, while the present advocates for „one’s growth” and in religious discourse „one’s improvement” has been everpresent. The same concepts also influenced health in relation to nation. When it comes to implementing actions for improving a country’s health, do you think it’s possible to draw the line between reasonable measures and excessive acts? And if yes, where does one draw this line?

2. Eugenics in Europe

The end of the 19th century, the whole of the 20th century and sadly, even the 21st century have in common the idea of extending theoretical biological principles, belonging to certain scientists and aristocrats, such as Francis Galton (the father of biological determinism), Charles Darwin or Arthur de Gobineau (the founder of the theory of the Aryan Master Race) to other areas. Reality proves that the concept of superiority of races and the practice of eugenics, in a variety of manners, were embraced by a considerable number of countries (France, the Scandinavian countries, Romania, several states of America), even though Germany seems to have remained the one and only country still frowned upon for its 20th century practices. Several countries fell for the promise of a “better race and improved species”, and in doing so, millions of people have suffered and have been wronged, and Romania makes no exception. A very clear example of this point of view is the conclusion of Essays in Eugenics, by Sir Francis Galton: ‘Persons who are born under their various rules live under them without any objection. They are unconscious of their restrictions, as we are unaware of the tension of the atmosphere. The subservience of civilised races to their several religious superstitions, customs, authority, and the rest, is frequently as abject as that of barbarians. The same classes of motives that direct other races, direct ours, so knowledge of their customs helps us to realise the wide range of what we may ourselves hereafter adopt, for reasons that will be as satisfactory to us in those future times, as theirs are or were to them, at the time when they prevailed. Reference has frequently been made to the probability of Eugenics hereafter receiving the sanction of religion. It may be asked, “How can it be shown that Eugenics fall within the purview of our own.” It cannot, any more than the duty of making provision for the future needs of oneself and family, which is a cardinal feature of modern civilization, can be deduced from the Sermon on the Mount. Religious precepts, founded on the ethics and practice of olden days, require to be reinterpreted to make them conform to the needs of progressive nations. Ours are already so far behind modern requirements that much of our practice and our profession cannot be reconciled without illegitimate casuistry. It seems to me that few things are more needed by us in England than a revision of our religion, to adapt it to the intelligence and needs of the present time. A form of it is wanted that shall be founded on reasonable bases and enforced by reasonable hopes and fears, and that preaches honest morals in unambiguous



language, which good men who take their part in the work of the world, and who know the dangers of sentimentalism, may pursue without reservation.'

In 1918, after The Great War and the Peace treaty, Romania had considerably expanded its surface, by regaining some of its former territories: Banat, Basarabia, the north of Bucovina and Transylvania. The newly constituted Romanian state having had to manage an extremely complex ethnical structure launched an extensive program for the homogenization of the national identity. This feat was achieved through public policies of societal modernization and calling upon eugenicists and anthropologists in order to assist the State in its complete reforming of the nation's body. Research was being conducted in order to establish the specific Romanian traits, while physicians endorsed, via lectures, ideologies concerning the necessity of educating the medical body in the identification of the "damaged" individuals. Stress was also laid on their involvement in the creation of a new society, with mentally and physically fit, bio-medically enhanced individuals. Countries, in which fascist orientation started developing, such as Germany, Italy and Spain shared the same purpose: the improvement of the national identity through drastic ethno-political measures intended to create pure and vigorous organisms to serve as examples.

It was as early as 1908 that the French publication "Archives d'anthropologie criminelle, de médecine légale et de psychologie normale et pathologique" wrote about the Romanian legislation designed to infringe upon the body and the sexuality of the "tarnished" individuals: epileptics, people with tuberculosis and syphilis. One of the Romanian academics, Constantin I. Andronescu (1859-1943), hygiene professor and gynaecologist, after a visit to the Dresden Hygiene Exposition (Germany) became acquainted with the ideas of the social and racial regeneration programme of the Race Hygiene Society (Gesellschaft für Rassenhygiene). He turned into an enthusiast supporter of the introduction in Romania of negative eugenics policies and introduced the use of the premarital health certificate and eugenic sterilisation in 1912.

3. Eugenic Sterilisation Around the World

WW1 and the crises it shaped, determined political leaders to engage the medical world in their efforts to identify solutions for the socio-economic decline, as well as for the contamination with "racially inferior, foreign elements". Countries like the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Germany, Romania, Poland or many countries in South America heavily debated on eugenic sterilisation, spreading daily bio-political ideologies among the general population through the use of radio and printed press, political discourse and scientific talks, in order to send a unified message. Hence, politics and medicine managed to breach one's visceral areas, in an attempt to control intimacy, sexuality and reproduction, by giving laws and disposing of the

civilian's bodies with an aim to building the nation's body according to their vision. The subject of eugenics started being deliberated on in Romania during the inter-war period, and afterwards even put into practice pertaining certain ethnic communities, as well as specific tiers of patients – particularly those with physical and mental disabilities, but also those suffering from some infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis or syphilis. Romanian intellectuals were concerned about the nation's deterioration and degeneration, seizing every circumstance to publicly manifest their disquietude. Starting with the 1920's, after returning from



studies or various scientific events that took place in United States of America or Germany and roused by the articles of important figures in Medicine, Anthropology and Sociology, Romanian eugenics proposed ideas such as:

- 1) Every degenerate individual should be sterilized and, if possible, returned to society.
- 2) Every degenerate and sterilized individual should be kept in isolation in asylums and colonies until he/she can be returned to society as a useful member.
- 3) Only those individuals who still represent a danger to society after their sterilization should be isolated for life, while they should sustain themselves and society through work in gardens, workshops etc. (...) It is in this direction that we must orient our efforts to protect superior elements and prohibit without mercy inferior elements from producing children and incurring family responsibilities." (cf. Ioan Manliu, *Crâmpeie de Romania și igienă romani*, Tipografia „Jockey-Club”, Bucharest, 1921, p. 21).

After The Great War (WW1), the decline of natality determined the authorities to have a great interest in raising the birth rates, particularly of the ‘pure and healthy’, while certain categories, such as the ones of “delinquents” and those with “morbid heredity” were subjected to radical measures of negative eugenics. The visually and acoustically impaired, epileptics, simpletons but also the women with children out of wedlock represented targets on the list of Romanian eugenicists, in accordance with the western ideologies. The children deemed as “hereditary inferior” were deemed as “worthless” for the Nation, therefore physicians (who were perceived as biologically responsible for the good of the Nation) were supposed to sterilise the offsprings of the aforementioned categories. Authors, such as Marius Turda, Professor at Oxford Brookes University wrote about inter-war Romania, stating that “a regular eugenic crusade against the degeneration of the Romanian nation was fought”. The perception of sterilisation as the optimal solution concerning the “hereditary inferior” population, imposed eugenics to be included in the formation of physicians.

In medical publications affirmations such as “If Romania had no input in fixing the issues of human biology, it should at least make the first decisive step, by performing surgery on 10.000 degenerates over the period of 1 year, in order to achieve experience, that would greatly contribute to the spread of this concept in Europe.” (Ion Manliu, M.D. – *Sterilizarea degenerațiilor*, “Revista de igienă sociala”, 1931).

The measures submitted by certain advocates of the eugenics ideology stirred up heavy debates and great controversy among the physicians, leading to “The Sanitary Law” to be passed in 1930, which allowed only the abortion for eugenic reasons, and not sterilisation. The present day perspective on those time is very clearly illustrated in the video on this subject, with Prof. Marius Turda.

4. Women’s Role in Interwar and Post-War Times

Both during the monarchical period and during the periods of dictatorship in Romania, natal policies were important topics of the public discourse, with the subject of abortion being a permanent cause for concern for the politicians, clergy and physicians.

A general truth, still valid in many countries nowadays is that the control of feminine fecundity represents a point of domination of one gender over the other, and natality has long embodied a game of power. It was



even worse in those days. All public figures with any power of decision were men, and they used this clout to reduce women to a purely utilitarian function – the reproduction of species. Maternity was perpetually on the political and medical agenda, and made use of it, through means of reducing it to a medical function and thus, controlling it. In inter-war Romania, even some feminist movements started promoting similar ideas. The female promoters of these ideals were invited to join forces with the male scholars in bolstering these principles. The well-known feminist Maria Baiulescu (1869-1941) held a conference in Cluj in 1927 for the Association for the Romanian's People Culture and Literature that was establishing the Medical and Biopolitics Section and the Feminine Section, in which she talked about the bio-political role of women. Here are a few excerpts from her speech: "I believe the first stage in the political life, that the woman aspires towards, is this biopolitical activity that is in her nature, the woman being the human's and nation's procreator, her being the soul of the family and the nation, because she is the one that passes on this heritage passed on from generation to generation, which is the most precious thesaurus that we possess and whose guarantee is only in her hands and her will."

"Our daughters will have to know, that entering a marriage, will come with the duty of giving new life to their nation and their country; just like our sons are prepared to serve the nation and protect the motherland, even with their sacrifice as a cost, the married woman will have to give her tribute to the country, by creating new life. (...) When the woman will have the conviction of this national duty, she will not fear maternity; she will not fight to prevent this new spring of life //and national power; she will not resort to rooting out the infant with its delicate soul from the womb. (...)

In the period between the two world wars, natality was either imposed through sanctions or encouraged by a reward system, the medical power thus holding the public control of all pregnancies, of women's life.

5. The 770 Decree or How to Appropriately a Woman's Body

Women continued to engage in debates concerning maternity and the exit from the sacrificial model so ever-present in the chauvinistic and traditionalist Romanian thinking. WW2, but especially the Romanian governments of the communist regime, mimicked the whole effort of the feminist movement in Romania. The dissolution of the feminist movement, the interdiction of women's freedom of expression, the negation of the right to make choices concerning their own bodies and the nationalisation of women's reproductive capacity were consequences of the communist policy laws.

Socialism promised to grant women power and gender equality, but sadly, they were just lies of the new regime propaganda. The sacrifice of women and mothers, ever so present in the public discourse after the two world wars, who had to dedicate themselves to healing the physical and emotional wounds of the Nation, and to caring for the war orphans, reappeared in the socialist rhetoric.

The state was in need of new workforce, thus, the woman ended up doubling the man in the industry and all public sections.

The woman's integration in the work field led to legislative changes. Until 1957, abortion, even though restricted (the termination of pregnancy was only permitted when it was endangering the mother's life and when there was the risk of a child with an infirmity), was practised on a large scale, with the unspoken consent of the authorities, being punished only as a felony.



The decree from 1957 (Decree 496/1957) was aiming at remodelling the society, the rapport between public and private, but also the Romanian family. The decree facilitated abortion and simplified the legislation concerning divorce, thus, Romania, falling in line with the Soviet Union's decision, which had previously done this in 1955. Reducing the maternal burden, as the communists claimed it, was never intended with a view to caring for women, but rather as a means to transform women in tools necessary for the building of socialism. The so-called emancipation brought on by the new law, turned out to be the intention of putting femininity and maternity on second place.

One of the major changes of the Romanian society happened after the 770 Decree, which passed on the 2nd of October 1966. This decree classified abortion as a crime and exclusively placed maternity in the services of the communist state.

Shortly after passing the 770 Decree, women from all over Romania were subjected to a complex mechanism of control and surveillance: periodically and without prior warning, physicians would perform gynaecological examinations, thus establishing a culture of fear and submission. Under the false pretext of screening for gynaecological conditions, the examinations were part of the surveillance process that aimed at tracing and recording the early pregnancies. Such initiatives. In which a gynaecologist and a proxy of the Interior Ministry were involved, took place in all institutions with female majority as personnel (from factories to schools).

Similar to how bio-political structures were established during the interwar period, the Superior Sanitary Council was set in 1983, with the purpose of supervising and implementing the pro-natality agenda. This council was set out to educate and help raise awareness regarding the achievement of the demographic objective, with a view to raising natality, as well as preventing the illegal termination of pregnancies. Aligned with the national policy were the speeches of the communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu. During a congress, he stated the following: "It constitutes the highest privilege and the utmost social mission for women, to give birth, to give life, to raise children." . Regardless of the embellished speeches and the harsh measures instituted by the medical police, in the early 80's natality dropped since 1966. During this time, women took somewhat control of their fertility, resorting to illegal actions that would endanger their freedom, but also their life.

As a result of passing the 770 Decree, the number of deaths due to the complications of illegal abortions massively increased. In 1989, the year of the Romanian revolution, there were 1193 deaths. Throughout 1966-1989 almost 10.000 deaths of women were recorded. It is clear as day that the reality and the numbers are completely different. According to the indications received, the major causes of deaths from the medical registries were "renal blockage" and "sepsis".

Romanian women were used by the communist regime as they saw fit, in order to suit their needs, exhibiting a total lack of respect and great contempt for women and their problems, in opposition to the demagoguery ever-so-present in the press. The fall of communism in 1989 rendered the possibility of addressing the matter of abortion as soon as possible in all ex-communist countries. In Romania, the liberalisation of abortion was the second decree issued by the interim government. The restriction of abortion in Western Germany and the legalisation of abortion in Eastern Germany gave rise to tensions that threatened the unification of both states, while in Poland abortion still continues to be a sensitive subject,



both on the parliament's agenda, as well as for the clergy and the population. The video with Prof. Marius Turda will refer to this decree and similarities to some present day situations in other countries, at present. The question he was asked is: A question on the other spectrum. Among other things, communist Romania is known for this so-called 770 decree, that made abortion a crime. Are there any European or international documents that align with this decree and how did that affect their countries?

6. Conclusion

here is no better way to conclude our lecture than with some lines from the public statement made by Prof. Marius Turda in his quality of a curator, before the opening of ..., «Nu suntem noi singurii»: Moștenirile globale ale eugeniei”” Around the middle of the 30s, Nazi propaganda claimed that their programme of eugenic sterilisation was not different from other similar legislations applied by countries such as the USA and Sweden, meant to be introduced in other countries such as Japan and other European countries for example, Great Britain, Hungary and Poland. The Nazis said “We are not the only ones”, thus hoping to obtain international support for their plans of eliminating individuals considered to have ‘genetic defects’. This lecture and the learning objects it contains invite medical students to become knowledgeable in the field of eugenics and to meditate on how eugenics fed into discriminatory decisions throughout the 20th century in the name of a better society, the creation of the ‘new human being’, ‘purity of race’. “The pandemics provoked by coronavirus urges us to openly analyse the way in which social attitudes rooted in eugenics continue to affect us directly. Continuous education, as well as public denunciation of eugenics, are essential components of our efforts to comprehend the aspects of an unjust and painful past, less discussed about in the public space.” (Prof. Marius Turda-Oxford Brookes University) 2 short videos from the interview with Prof. Turda before the exhibition...«Nu suntem noi singurii»: Moștenirile globale ale eugeniei””.

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