

**Dreams of perfection:  
Eugenics, Ethics and Politics from the Nineteenth  
to the Twenty-First Century**

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# Abstract

This thesis seeks to trace the continuity of eugenic thought and attitudes throughout history. In doing so, it aims to intervene in the debate surrounding the return of eugenics where the history of eugenics is contested by opponents and advocates of modern eugenics. As a means of showing the uses and disuses of history for the purposes of this debate, it includes an attempt at writing a different history of eugenics, with a focus on its volatile nature. Finally, it concludes with evaluating what continuities can still be established and their implications.

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# 1. Introduction

A multitude of technological advancements in medical technology and genetics have prompted discussions surrounding eugenics. Such contemporary debates touch on a variety of phenomena; some of which are historical firsts owing to the fact that they are direct results of new technologies. The novelty of the debate surrounding eugenics is further solidified with new, innovative approaches in humanities, giving rise to new fields of inquiry such as bioethics, and opens up new inquiries in contemporary ethical and political philosophy. However, the eugenics debate is at the same time haunted by a historical elephant in the room, owing to the highly controversial and oftentimes downright problematic practices and beliefs associated with the movement.

The main drive of the present work is to mediate between contemporary philosophical debates and modern historical scholarship. My main contention is that a greater familiarity with the history of eugenics would afford the opportunity of appreciating certain nuances of eugenic thought, nuances that would inform contemporary debates in interesting ways. This suggestion mainly rests on the apparent lack of historical depth in current debates, where eugenics is attributed with a cluster of characteristics the prevalence of which was exaggerated in the Anglosphere and yet had significant regional variations outside the Anglo-Saxon context; or sets of beliefs and ways of thinking that reveal themselves to be much more mediated by the national-political context to be easily taken as being part of a list of natural characteristics of eugenics.

The suggestion that certain aspects of eugenics may have been more unique to the context of Anglo-Saxon politics explicitly and primarily engages the racial question. There was, undoubtedly, a number of racist beliefs that were reflected in the eugenic policies put forward by British and especially American eugenics societies. Yet, when one ventures out of these two contexts, the racial aspect of eugenics takes up a variety of different faces that render the matter considerably fuzzier than it may seem. While a bona-fide discussion of historiographical trends and traditions cannot be taken up here, nonetheless it is important to point out that the problems outlined above are mainly results of an older body of literature; one that continues to be dominant outside of historical studies. And while the contributions of these writers are undoubtedly valuable, the history of eugenics has grown quite exponentially, with a number of studies that emphasize the kinds of regional variations to which my remarks above alluded. The aim of this thesis is to complicate the

debate on eugenics with the insights afforded by these recent historiographical attempts in order to help cast the discussion under more historically accurate lights.

While such an historical account of eugenics is undoubtedly beneficial in order to position contemporary debates; I am aware that the body of historical phenomena do not exhaust the current range of issues by any means. The simple fact of significant technological advancement is generative of a set of questions that simply do not find any reflection in history - such as the premise of genetic intervention and the issues that it generates. Historical eugenics had access to a much more limited range of technologies, and therefore possibilities of intervention, which confined it into a narrower horizon when it came to practicing what it preached. In that sense, giving adequate treatment to the new issues raised by contemporary medicine and genetics is in the historian's interest as well as in that of the philosopher and the ethicist, so as to capture what remains and what changed.

### 1.1 What *was* eugenics?

As is well known, eugenics is a Greek compound, meaning well-born. Francis Galton is frequently credited as the originator of this term, being the father of eugenics as a scientific discipline and movement. However, the word eugenes existed and was used in Ancient Greek - and in that sense is not a modern invention. In any case, while this philological connection seems to have escaped the attention of most scholars, that eugenic thought existed in some form in Ancient Greek writings is an often repeated feature of discourse on eugenics, both in contemporary debates and in historical eugenicist tracts. Plato is attributed such preoccupations, owing to the allegory of the metals in the Republic. There, Plato argues that citizens can be grouped into those who have bronze, silver and gold in their blood and then encouraged to reproduce accordingly. This is taken by some writers as an instance of eugenic thinking. While I will shortly call the merits of such arguments into question, the practice of claiming Greek roots for eugenics exemplifies the ways of thinking about history that this thesis aims to argue against. Therefore, these arguments merit a more thorough examination.

The main line of reasoning behind these ostensible genealogies is that any vision to interfere with family life in the interest of monitoring or improving the quality of possible offspring is some-

how eugenics. So argues David Galton, in the introductory pages of his *Eugenics: The Future of Human Life in the 21st Century*.<sup>1</sup> However intuitively appealing this suggestion may be, it does not withstand further scrutiny. To classify, for instance, the practice of discouraging consanguineous marriage, especially between siblings as eugenics broadens the semantic range of the term without any apparent benefit. Similarly, and much more pertinent to the contemporary debate on eugenics; to classify certain therapeutic measures as eugenic engages the problem of demarcation between treatment/enhancement in a counterproductive manner. Suggesting that eugenics covers any attempt at any point in history to improve the conditions of progeny is not a philosophically sound suggestion, in that it obscures the question of what eugenics is more than it illuminates.

If this position is philosophically untenable, it is also historically dubious. While writers are fond of claiming a Greek lineage, the narrative seems to break between Ancient Greece and Francis Galton. Yet, if eugenics is such a broad term, surely there were attempts at improving posterity throughout the two millennia that separate Ancient Greece from Victorian era England? This is simply to ask a question that will guide the rest of this thesis, and one which this thesis seeks to understand: what belongs to the very definition of eugenics, and what is incidental? If we reason that eugenics is simply the concern for the improvement of humankind by way of improving its progeny, we will lose both argumentative and historical accuracy, sacrificing for the sake of a genealogy the use of which is questionable.

## 1.2 What *is* eugenics?

The question of what eugenics is will be largely a matter of examining historical cases with a view to isolating those characteristics which we can reliably identify as *conditiones sine quibus non* for eugenics. In other words, there must be an identifiable set of characteristics that are stable across virtually all eugenics. As the historical case studies presented in the next chapter will show, this is considerably trickier than it seems at the outset. Nevertheless, my proposition is to take a dispo-

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<sup>1</sup> David J. Galton, *Eugenics: The Future of Human Life in the 21st Century* (Abacus, 2002), p. xii. Galton's argument is actually more nuanced and would have been much closer to my subsequent definitions: "if your aim is to use scientific methods to make the best of the inherited component for the health and wellbeing of the children of the next generation [...]" goes the argument. However, Galton then immediately claims that eugenics has been with us since the Ancient Greeks and includes two chapters on Platonic and Aristotelian "eugenics". Therefore, I take his definition as the broadest possible.

sition, rather than a theoretical construct as central to eugenics – the belief in, and the desire for, human perfectibility. This is, for all intents and purposes, the defining aspect of eugenics – and as I will show, apart from such a basic disposition, eugenics shows a dizzying level of variation. Furthermore, taking this as the guiding thread is helpful in that it helps to link history with today, since the proponents of new eugenics position themselves in most cases explicitly opposite to historical eugenics. Whether that is warranted or not is another debate, which will be treated in the following section. For now, a few attempts at a definition for eugenics coming from historians, since eugenics cannot be understood simply as a wish to biologically improve humankind, with a view to perfection, through biological means; as it would run the same risks for which I have criticized David Galton’s broad definition.

In his *Political Biology*, Maurizio Meloni lists radical biologism (one could also say radical biological reductionism), utopian social engineering, unlimited empowerment of scientific experts and the belief in primacy of the race over the individual (or in more contemporary terms, rights of society over the individual).<sup>2</sup> This is a helpful typology in understanding eugenics insofar as one limits oneself to pre-World War Two eugenics. Biological determinism was surely a feature of eugenics, insofar as the endeavor would have been pointless without a belief in biology and genetics as decisive for a range of social phenomena. Similarly, it is difficult to argue against the second item, since to argue against it would partly imply arguing against my own definition as well. The third item is less convincing; and reading the brief elaboration he offers, one wonders why Meloni does not consider the more austere and yet much better description he offers to support his claim as the actual characteristic: “eugenicists saw the sciences as morally neutral additions to political and ethical debates”. This is a far better description that holds across eugenic phenomena than unlimited empowerment. Fourth, the emphasis on the right of society over the individual implies coercive, illiberal practices are necessary characteristics of eugenics. This is unconvincing, since there has been rather benign and individualistic eugenics, one example of which will be discussed in detail as my first case study. But, as with the previous item, it is possible to accept a slightly modified version: it is clear that eugenicists saw improvement as something more than a matter of individual

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<sup>2</sup> M. Meloni, *Political Biology: Science and Social Values in Human Heredity from Eugenics to Epigenetics* (Springer, 2016), p. 66–67.

choice, even if they did not unanimously call for coercion into eugenics; it is clear that it was seen as a morally binding duty. There were degrees to the “subordination of the good of the individual to the health of the species”, but surely, there was a conscious effort at identifying eugenics as a moral duty. Nevertheless, from Meloni we can take biologism and utopian faith in perfectibility as is, and add the modified versions of item number three and four; a belief in science as a neutral tool and a moral call for reproductive responsibility.

Additionally, eugenics could be understood as an expression and an instance of modernism; as Marius Turda’s book eloquently demonstrates.<sup>3</sup> In this account, which analyzes a broader range of historical experience than Meloni, eugenics appears as a configuration of modernist narratives in biological terms – yet Turda is much more cautious to try and circumscribe eugenics. Therefore, his approach takes eugenics already as a “polysemic” body of discourses rather than a fixed, programmatic ideology.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the clearest definition of eugenics he offers is eugenics as an attempt to grapple with a degenerative modernity as not only a “cultural, political and social crisis, but also a biological one.”<sup>5</sup> The problem with adopting Turda’s approach wholesale is that it is considerably inflected with the Foucault’s notion of biopolitics and therefore would distort the analysis this thesis aims to undertake. I leave biopolitics entirely out of this thesis, since it implies a continuity between not only historical eugenics and today’s eugenics in particular, but would suggest that since biopower pervades modernity, whether or not historical and contemporary eugenics can be distinguished on other accounts, they will necessarily be linked because both are modern – therefore, biopolitical – phenomena. But Turda’s account is helpful in that it captures eugenics in its defensive guise, which Meloni’s definition lacks. It is indeed necessary to view historical eugenics as a largely defensive endeavor, waged in a Quixotic fashion against the degenerative threats it perceived. In what follows, the theme of degeneration will be examined closely in order to further question continuities and parallels with our day.

This brief definitional discussion leaves us with a somewhat working definition. Eugenics can be understood as a utopian endeavor, aiming to perfect humanity through scientific means (which

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<sup>3</sup> M. Turda, *Modernism and Eugenics* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Turda, *Modernism and Eugenics*, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 121–122.

are value-neutral, therefore supra-political) in order to resist adverse forces. However, such a definition would be too unwieldy, and arguments can be made to disqualify certain items from a minimal definition of necessary characteristics. Therefore, I suggest understanding eugenics as a quest for biological perfection regarded as a substantial, if not conclusive step in fixing mankind's problems. The notion of "a substantial, if not conclusive step" is useful in that it allows for gradations in biological determinism while recognizing it as a primary concern; while "fixing problems" covers both the technocratic sense and the defensive connotations laid out above. Lastly, "quest for" implies a collective effort, or a call for one, capturing the moral dimension touched on above; and I maintain fully that a belief in perfection as a morally and practically desirable end is nothing less than fundamental for eugenics.

### 1.3 New Eugenics and Human Enhancement

The abstractions offered above are helpful in navigating a broad range of disparate historical phenomena. However, to appreciate the need for historical intervention, turning to contemporary debates is crucial. As I will show momentarily, both the opponents and proponents of new eugenics tend to rely on a thin and lackluster historiography, leading to a loss in argumentative quality. Nonetheless, history looms large in the background, owing to the fact that eugenics is such a historically charged term that it is easily invoked as a pejorative. As Diane Paul, a historian of eugenics argues, the matter of historical (dis)continuities becomes a proving ground for both sides, in the struggle to clear one's name from eugenics or in the attempt to present contemporary proponents as being less distant than they think.<sup>6</sup> If indeed the battle for continuity carries such a significance, then it is only logical to turn to history and examine it more closely.

Certain aspects of the definition I suggested above are arguably present in today's discussions surrounding human enhancement. One of the forerunners of the enhancement debate, Julian Savulescu for instance, comes considerably close to biological determinism in his 2005 essay

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<sup>6</sup> Diane B. Paul, "Genetic Engineering and Eugenics: The Uses of History," in *Is Human Nature Obsolete?: Genetics, Bioengineering, and the Future of the Human Condition*, ed. Harold W. Baillie and Timothy Casey (MIT Press, 2005), 123–52.. p. 142.

on the necessity of enhancement.<sup>7</sup> Savulescu understands rationality as central to human nature and autopoiesis as its manifestation par excellence, which leads him to argue that various attempts at re-making our biological constitution are but natural extensions of this autopoietic nature and are permissible as such.<sup>8</sup> When he calls for research into the genetic basis of certain problematic behaviors<sup>9</sup> and in admonishing the advocates of nurture against nature as “genophobes”, Savulescu certainly echoes the biological determinism with which the old eugenics is associated.<sup>10</sup> Savulescu distances himself from old eugenics on the basis of his individualism in opposition to their collectivism. However, in the light of my definition offered above, such a simplistic dichotomy need not be taken at face value. In calling for enhancement as a moral obligation, he again comes close to the eugenic ethos outlined above. While, to his credit, he recognizes fully that this moral obligation is not binding and is not a weightier moral duty than a call to quit smoking<sup>11</sup>, this justification seems an ad hoc attempt to move away from the problematic implications of his arguments. Moreover, my definition would still allow for this “soft” moralism.

A less cavalier case for enhancement is made by Nicholas Agar, in his 1998 essay *Liberal Eugenics*. His is an attempt to merge Rawlsian liberalism with the ethos of enhancement. He is, however, much more cautious when it comes to toeing the biological determinism line, in that he argues for an “agnosticism” regarding whether nature or nurture has the final say in shaping the individual.<sup>12</sup> Further, Agar does not stipulate a moral duty in the positive sense as Savulescu, but rather argues for the permissibility of enhancement. Agar’s project can be understood as an attempt at extending reproductive freedoms – which he contrasts with the efforts of old eugenicists in limiting them.<sup>13</sup> Further, where old eugenics wished to fashion citizens out of a centrally

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<sup>7</sup> Julian Savulescu, “New Breeds of Humans: The Moral Obligation to Enhance” *Reproductive BioMedicine Online* 10 (January 1, 2005): 36–39, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1472-6483\(10\)62202-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1472-6483(10)62202-X).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 38.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 37. The full ensemble is: aggression and criminal behaviour, alcoholism, anxiety, antisocial personality disorder, maternal behaviour, homosexuality and neuroticism.

<sup>10</sup> The opening lines of the essay read: “the genophobe claims that it is our environment, or culture that defines us, not genetics.” Ibid. p. 36.

<sup>11</sup> Julian Savulescu, “Procreative Beneficence: Why We Should Select the Best Children,” *Bioethics* 15, no. 5–6 (2001): 413–26, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8519.00251>. p. 415.

<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Agar, “Liberal Eugenics,” *Public Affairs Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (1998): 137–55, p. 140.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p.137.

designed mold, his eugenics is founded on the premise of plurality of life plans. Here he places his hopes on liberalism's ability to guarantee plurality in our eugenic future – leading him to claim that “differing ideas about the best life plan will surely disrupt any centrally directed eugenic pattern”.<sup>14</sup> Agar's rendition of eugenics falls considerably far from the definition I offered; he is cautious with regards to biological determinism, he argues not for a moral duty but permissibility and does not converge with a perfectionist attitude.

In any case, both thinkers have received considerable flak from the anti-eugenics camp. As I have suggested, most criticism of eugenics today takes the form of tracing continuities and asserting equivalences. Robert Sparrow, for instance, has argued that since arguments such as Savulescu's utilize a superlative notion in the form of “having the best children possible”, and that “in any given environment, there can only be one best genome”, the new eugenics fails to live up to its pluralistic self-representation.<sup>15</sup> He also suggests that, a-la Agar, if we acknowledge that a particular individual is a result of both genes and the environment, by stressing genetic intervention, eugenics runs the risk of capitulating to social injustices – if parents have the duty to ensure they bear the child which has the highest potential to live a good life, what of female children in sexist societies, or of racial minorities in racist ones?<sup>16</sup> Further, Sparrow stresses that the identification of certain genetic combinations as best runs the risk of implying others are inferior, and expresses concern that there is miniscule distance between suggesting that “people with better genes live better lives” to “they are better people”.<sup>17</sup> Continuing this line of pointing out covert similarities between old and new eugenics, Merryn Ekberg examines six arguments that are commonly cited to support the demarcation in question. She evaluates claims such as that new eugenics offers new opportunities to women and disabled people, or that it has an individualist ethos based on solid science, as opposed to the discriminatory, racist and pseudoscientific eugenics, based on a collectivistic spirit, in discrete

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 144.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Sparrow, “Ethics, Eugenics, and Politics,” in *The Future of Bioethics: International Dialogues*, ed. Akira Akabayashi (Oxford University Press, 2014), 139–53. p. 142.

<sup>16</sup> cf. Ibid, p. 143-144 and Robert Sparrow, “A Not-So-New Eugenics: Harris and Savulescu on Human Enhancement,” *The Hastings Center Report* 41, no. 1 (2011): 32–42. p. 35.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 148.

sub-sections.<sup>18</sup> She points out that the arguments for selecting against disability have found a hostile audience in the disability rights activists, who see it as a mere extension of the old eugenicist programs to breed out disabilities.<sup>19</sup> In the same vein, on evaluating the claim that an individualist, human-rights conscious approach sets new eugenics apart, Ekberg argues that “individual choices affect others, and the cumulative effect [...] must ultimately have social consequences”, reflecting Sparrow’s criticism that an appeal to “the best” always implies exclusion.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Merryn Ekberg, “The Old Eugenics and the New Genetics Compared,” *Social History of Medicine* 20, no. 3 (December 1, 2007): 581–93, <https://doi.org/10.1093/shm/hkm075>.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p. 585.

<sup>20</sup> Merryn Ekberg, “The Old Eugenics and the New Genetics Compared,” *Social History of Medicine* 20, no. 3 (December 1, 2007): 581–93, <https://doi.org/10.1093/shm/hkm075>. p. 585.

## 2. Assessing History

Taking Diane Paul's suggestion that historiography became a major stake in the debate surrounding contemporary eugenics and human enhancement, this chapter will offer a look through history. It begins with an overview of biological thought in the nineteenth century. This is justified on two grounds: firstly, it is necessary to appreciate the scientific-discursive context in which eugenics was conceived in order to truly understand the language it developed later on. Secondly, most studies on eugenics focus on the twentieth century, by which time eugenics was a considerably consolidated, institutionalized endeavor. In shifting the emphasis to the very beginnings of eugenics, I hope to both contribute something more original than recounting the mainstream story once again; as well as to offer a finer-grained look into the beginnings of eugenics. To appreciate the germinal form of eugenics where most of its tenets were yet under negotiation, a working understanding of the nineteenth century will prove beneficial.

This primer is followed by three case studies, selected in order to further demonstrate the limits of the historiography used in contemporary debates. The first case study is a close look into the tales and myths of degeneration, so popular towards the end of the nineteenth century and integral to the eugenic ethos. There, I will demonstrate the differences between the languages of our times and theirs; how such myths developed from a largely liberal and reformist point, instead of a socially conservative, authoritarian one. Such an emphasis on the liberal origins is meant neither to exonerate eugenics nor to smear liberalism. Rather, as I will argue, understanding the nuances of such a central eugenic narrative will help disentangle historically unwarranted assumptions. The second case study focuses on the Oneida Community, which was arguably the first practical manifestation of eugenics. It will constitute an example of a rather non-coercive eugenics; thereby applying pressure to the notion of eugenics as a necessarily repressive ideology. Thirdly, I will offer a broader overview of eugenics as it continued to be contested and forced into internal conflict through the twentieth century. Four micro histories will be discussed: French and Soviet eugenics as historically atypical, German eugenics as surprisingly equivocal prior to Hitler and Christian eugenics as an unlikely alliance are all attempts at demonstrating the malleability of eugenics.

A polemic between two historians in the pages of the *Historical Journal* is highly informative in terms of the approach I will adopt here. This polemic grew out of Michael Freedman's 1979

article “Eugenics and the Progressive Thought: A Study In Ideological Affinity” where Freeden sought to understand certain progressive leanings within the various eugenicist currents earlier in the century.<sup>21</sup> The main quandary, as Freeden puts it is to understand how can eugenics be made compatible with ideologies that stress “environmental influences” and are “devoted to the doctrine of the inherent equality of man”, that sought to “preserve the ‘weaker’ elements of society (quotation marks mine)” and “regarded questions of procreation as entirely private”?<sup>22</sup> Freeden shows that not all eugenicists were hardliners on the nature side of the nature/nurture debate, and that significant concessions were made to nurture by a number of prominent eugenicists. In response, Greta Jones wrote a paper questioning the validity of Freeden’s premises, suggesting that eugenics remained within the right-wing’s political repertoire.<sup>23</sup> In other words, she dismisses Freeden’s efforts to find links between progressive thought and eugenics – to which Freeden then responded in a brief rejoinder. Here, Freeden makes an important point regarding ideologies and their *modus vivendi*: he understands ideologies as “clusters of ideas” with a core, a periphery and adjacent ideas surrounding these.<sup>24</sup> In his understanding, ideologies may differ with respect to all three – opening up ideological analysis to identify a large set of “unholy alliances.”<sup>25</sup>

This polemic and Freeden’s mission statement is important, in that it helps to introduce the approach taken here aptly. Such an approach, which attempts to remain sensitive to the myriad of reconfigurations of eugenics, is helpful on two accounts: firstly, the history of eugenics, taken as an international movement, shows a sizeable variation across national borders. Therefore, differentiating between ideological core and periphery is necessary if we are to emphasize both differences and similarities between differing contexts. Secondly, since this thesis aims to provide a historically mediated intervention into contemporary debates, pinning down the ideological core and

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<sup>21</sup> Freeden, Michael. “Eugenics and Progressive Thought: A Study in Ideological Affinity.” *The Historical Journal* 22, no. 3 (1979): 645–71. doi:10.1017/S0018246X00017027.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p. 650.

<sup>23</sup> Greta Jones, “Eugenics And Social Policy Between The Wars,” *The Historical Journal* 25, no. 3 (September 1982): 717–28, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X00011882>.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Freeden, “Eugenics and Ideology,” *The Historical Journal* 26, no. 4 (December 1983): 959–62, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X00012772>. p. 959.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* p. 960.

stripping it out of peripheral and adjacent ideas will offer a clearer account of what to expect from a eugenic revival.

## 2.1 Heredity and Evolution: A Primer on the Origins of Eugenics and Biological Thought in the Nineteenth Century

The first formal statement of eugenics is of course found in the work of the English scientist Francis Galton (1822-1911). Galton was interested in documenting and quantifying phenomena, and he became interested in the phenomenon of genius. This fascination culminated in his series of essays, later published as the book *Hereditary Genius* in 1869. This work, which does not contain yet the mention of eugenics, was motivated by Galton's observation that "characteristics cling to families" and he "began by thinking over the dispositions and achievements of my contemporaries at school, at college, and in after life, and was surprised to find how frequently ability seemed to go by descent." He then "[...] made a cursory examination into the kindred of about four hundred illustrious men of all periods of history, and the results were such, in my own opinion, as completely to establish the theory that genius was hereditary [...]"<sup>26</sup> Galton's work, for all of its shortcomings and problems, is mainly a statistical account of the occurrence of genius in family lineages – and in that way is yet considerably distant from the final form of eugenics. This is due to several factors, most of which will be of necessity excluded from greater analysis here, but which nonetheless can be summarized with acknowledging that at this time, most of the vocabulary that eugenics will later adopt was unavailable. For instance, the mechanisms that governed human heredity and reproduction were yet unclear to the biologists of the 19th century, including Charles Darwin. At the time of Darwin, comprehension of the mechanisms of heredity went hardly further than "like begets like" and the Lamarckian model of inheritance; while the supposed mechanism of inheritance was the idea of pangenesis, traceable to Greek figures like Hippocrates and Anaxagoras.<sup>27</sup> It is important to understand these differences, since they will feature in different forms in subsequent debates: Lamarckism in particular will become an important source of contention within

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<sup>26</sup> Francis Galton, *Hereditary Genius* (D. Appleton, 1891), p. ix

<sup>27</sup> Ernst Mayr, *The Growth of Biological Thought: Diversity, Evolution, and Inheritance* (Harvard University Press, 1982). p. 635.

eugenics, since it holds that acquired characteristics can be passed down to following generations, some Lamarckian adherents of eugenics will come to use such arguments for emphasizing social reform. Therefore, it is necessary to give a passing account of these fundamental ideas of 19th century biology.

The Lamarckian model was developed by the French naturalist and polymath Jean-Pierre Antoine de Monet, Chevalier de Lamarck (1744-1829), and was an early theory of evolution, or as Stephen Jay Gould writes, “the first comprehensive attempt to formulate an evolutionary theory”.<sup>28</sup> In very simple terms, Lamarck’s theory suggested that environmental change, which was inevitable and immutable, would eventually affect changes in organisms. These changes first manifest as habits with the potential to become morphological, structural changes over time, should the effects persist.<sup>29</sup> In contemporary vocabulary, then, Lamarck formulated the idea of environmental adaptation. By which mechanisms would such adaptations be passed on and not remain merely individual instances? This is, as I have already alluded to above, is the idea of inheritance of acquired characteristics – that organisms inherit these morphological changes from their parents. This idea of acquired characteristics being passed down generations would then reign supreme virtually until competing theories resulting from the works of Galton, Weisman and ultimately Gregor Mendel will sideline Lamarckism for most biologists in the late 19th and especially 20th century. Yet, to further appreciate the distance between today’s biology and the 19th century context, a brief explanation of the theory of pangenesis, which Darwin had used and developed will be helpful. As I have suggested, at the time the biological mechanisms of inheritance, evolution and reproduction were far from the epistemic stability with which we associate them today. Pangenesis was the view that offspring resulted not just from gametes but from gemmules which represent all the different kinds of cells in the body, and eventually accumulate in the reproductive organs.<sup>30</sup> The production of these gemmules and their entry into the circulation of the body were then affected by the changes in, and the demands of, the environment.<sup>31</sup> Thus, Darwin had suggested a mechanism for the in-

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<sup>28</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory* (Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 176.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p. 177.

<sup>30</sup> Mayr, *The Growth of Biological Thought* p. 693.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 694.

heritance of adaptive mechanisms, somewhat in line with the Lamarckian view of heredity (indeed Darwin remains, broadly speaking, a Lamarckian).

Such was the milieu in which eugenic thinking developed. Galton developed his ideas further in his *Inquiries into the Human Faculty and Its Development*, published in 1883. It is in this book that the word eugenics first occurs – specifically, it is found immediately following a discussion of racial differences and explained further in a footnote. It is illustrative to reproduce the passage in its entirety here:

“I do not propose to enter further into the anthropometric differences of race, for the subject is a very large one, and this book does not profess to go into detail. Its intention is to touch on various topics more or less connected with that of the cultivation of race, or, as we might call it, with ‘eugenic’ questions and to present the results of several of my own separate investigations.”<sup>32</sup>

In a footnote to this sentence, Galton then talks about the need for a science of improving stock that goes beyond questions of “judicious mating” and “takes cognisance of all influences that tend [...] to give to the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable”.<sup>33</sup> For the purposes of definition I have touched upon in the preceding chapter, Galton’s suggestion that eugenics looks to be more than a simple matter of “judicious mating” is important, in that it conforms to my suggestion that eugenics cannot be understood so broadly as to encompass any matter of prudence concerning reproduction. Secondly, it is plainly visible that in its germinal form eugenics was already formulated as an instrumental program designed to bolster certain populations over others, again discrediting the wider definition discussed above. There are, however, reasons to hesitate before assuming that from this point onwards, eugenics came into existence as a fully articulated, programmatic ideology and disseminated as such. As we will see, eugenicist movements grew concomitantly, and in communication with each other, but at the same time they were strongly inflected with the national cultures and traditions within which

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<sup>32</sup> Francis Galton, *Inquiries Into Human Faculty and Its Development* (Macmillan, 1883), p. 24–25.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. footnote to pages 24–25.

they were submerged. As such, different aspects of eugenics were emphasized across different contexts, as the subsequent studies (and especially the last subchapter) will show.

## 2.2 A Monstrous Sickhouse: Tales of Degeneration

Hannah Arendt's *On Revolution* strikes a familiar nineteenth century chord in her admonishment of the politics of bread and the mass. In the second chapter, she argues that the appearance of the poor and their subjugation by the "needs of their body" had "burst into the scene of the French Revolution" now reversed the understanding of history and bequeathed it with the "biological imagery which underlies and pervades the organic and social theories of history".<sup>34</sup> What is familiar to the nineteenth century is Arendt's shock at the sight of the unwashed masses, her tendency to use the image of the "mass" as a diagnostic tool. Such an identification of the poverty-stricken masses at the heart of social ills and the concomitant rise of a medicalizing discourse (another familiar note on which Arendt's remarks strike) were crucial to the rise of eugenics.

Around the same time that eugenics was gestating; another significant idea had consolidated itself in France and begun branching out from there into Europe at large: the myth of degeneration. Despite originating from medicine, it is difficult to pin degeneration down and offer an anatomical view of it, because degeneration was a collection of narratives ultimately rooted in fears and anxieties of the urban elite rather than a fully developed theory.

It is necessary to understand the ideational space within which the typical nineteenth century mind was immersed in order to fully grasp the myth of degeneration and its ultimate relation to eugenics. The nineteenth century was Janus-faced, in that it was caught between optimism and pessimism regarding the future in a fundamental sense. On the one hand, it was the age of security, reason and peace, as Jan Werner-Müller quotes from Stefan Zweig: "everything violent seemed impossible." Further, as Werner-Müller himself puts it, people of Zweig's generation in Europe truly felt the march towards "ever more freedom as well as 'true cosmopolitanism'".<sup>35</sup> At the same time, this "hitherto unexcelled movement and expansion" awakened doubts in people's minds, urging a

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<sup>34</sup> Arendt *On Revolution* p. 59–60.

<sup>35</sup> Both in: Jan-Werner Müller, *Contesting Democracy: Political Ideas in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Yale University Press, 2013), p. 10.

counter-narrative to such an extent that “whether the quality of life was improving or deteriorating, became [...] in Europe, the crucial intellectual dilemma of the century”.<sup>36</sup>

It is possible to see the nineteenth century hopelessly caught between these two extremes due to, alongside other factors, the profound challenges resulting from the progress of the sciences. For instance, the discovery of entropy and the laws of thermodynamics now altered a centuries long confidence in the infiniteness of the universe and presented the picture of a universe deteriorating towards an inevitable heat-death. “Energy was constantly becoming less usable for man; it was constantly being transformed into heat, which was constantly being diffused.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, the image of degeneration in the imagination of the fin-de-siècle did not pervade only the urban world but extended to the entire cosmos. Discoveries in the life sciences, such as the theory of evolution or nascent psychology put the identity of the human under increasing pressure as well, prompting a general feeling of insecurity and indecisiveness; or as Kelly Hurley puts it, brought forth an image of the human as a “bodily ambiguated or otherwise discontinuous in identity”.<sup>38</sup> In general, then, one of its most famous literary inventions, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1886) helps to analogize the crisis in which the nineteenth century found itself – as Arthur Herman recognizes it as capturing the “duality of civilization”.<sup>39</sup>

So was the broader context that gave birth to theories of degeneration. It is usually the French psychiatrist Benedict Augustin Morel (1809-1873) who is credited as the point of origin for degeneration theory. Morel initially worked on what is today known as congenital iodine deficiency syndrome, formerly called ‘cretinism’ – a disease which causes significant mental and physical underdevelopment. Morel’s studies on ‘cretinism’, according to Daniel Pick, provided the background of the theory of degeneration in that the “cretin” came to exemplify the “degenerate”.<sup>40</sup> Morel published his “*Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l’espèce humaine*

<sup>36</sup> Modris Eksteins, “History and Degeneration: Of Birds and Cages,” in *Degeneration: The Dark Side of Progress*, by J. Edward Chamberlin and Sander L. Gilman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 1–23, p. 2.

<sup>37</sup> Mason Tattersall, “Thermal Degeneration: Thermodynamics and the Heat-Death of the Universe in Victorian Science, Philosophy, and Culture,” in *Decadence, Degeneration and the End: Studies in the European Fin de Siècle*, ed. Christopher Nissen Marja Härmänmaa (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>38</sup> Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge University Press, 1996). p. 5.

<sup>39</sup> Arthur Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History* (Simon and Schuster, 1997), p. 122–123.

<sup>40</sup> Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, C.1848-1918* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 47.

[Treatise on the Physical, Intellectual and Moral Degeneration of the Human Race]” in 1857, where he suggested that “the clearest idea we can form of the human race’s degeneration” can be found in the “pathological deviation from an original type.”<sup>41</sup> Degeneration threatened the unity of the individual, understood as a “biological and spiritual ensemble”, a pathological movement from an ideal point of origin to a destitute destination.<sup>42</sup> In other words, Morel conceptualized degeneration as a disintegrating force moving within the individual, threatening its constitution from within. For Morel, the causes of degeneration were a large array of factors, ranging from alcoholism and opium use through exposure to poisonous chemical material and to even geological factors such as dwelling in marshes.<sup>43</sup> Once affected, the individual would devolve, bodily, intellectually and morally. But it was not only the individual that degenerated and ultimately perished. Once degeneration entered a family line, it was passed down from one generation to the next. Since the individual was an ensemble, degeneration meant bodily disfigurement, ‘insanity’ and morally questionable behavior to appear progressively down a family line. The terminus of Morel’s degeneration was “complete idiocy, sterilization and death”. Pick situates this prognosis where the end result is the slow death of the family line in the context of fears of population decline prevalent in France. In different contexts, these prognoses also varied: in Britain dominant fears came to be an overgrowth of the ‘degenerate’ population, and thus eventual sterility was disputed.<sup>44</sup>

Two key points require attention here. Firstly, as the introductory chapter on nineteenth century biology mentioned, the dominant conception of evolution at this time was Lamarckian, which rendered the individual perpetually vulnerable against a host of environmental factors. Degeneration as conceived by Morel in combination with this view of heredity therefore had a considerable emphasis on environmental factors. This is further compounded by the fact that Morel himself was a convinced social reformer, belonging to a Catholicism that believed in the need for “active and devout intervention in the present social world”<sup>45</sup> as well as an advocate of social med-

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<sup>41</sup> Quoted in: S. Karschay, *Degeneration, Normativity and the Gothic at the Fin de Siècle* (Springer, 2015), p. 12.

<sup>42</sup> Pick *Faces of Degeneration*, p. 50.

<sup>43</sup> Eric T. Carlson, “Medicine and Degeneration: Theory and Praxis,” in *Degeneration: The Dark Side of Progress*, by J. Edward Chamberlin and Sander L. Gilman (Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 123.

<sup>44</sup> Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, p. 51.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. p. 44.

icine that sought to ameliorate what can be ameliorated.<sup>46</sup> What prompted Morel to suggest social segregation for degenerates was then not founded in his disdain, but rather in his conviction that it was simply not a curable condition.<sup>47</sup> Otherwise, as Pick reports from an obituary, Morel “kept his table and his house open to the sick, despite his own illness living in benign community with his patients.”<sup>48</sup> This is important in that it stresses once again the need for caution in engaging with the ideas of this period, where belief in progress and reform did not translate to the same kind of liberalism with which we associate them today. A second key point is that Morel’s degeneration did not mean an invective against racial mixing – another subsequent development in eugenic thought. Strikingly, Morel cast degeneration specifically in opposition to the “race problem”, conceiving of it as a “national issue”. It threatened “the civilized” as opposed to those outside of civilization, as a kind of internal threat.<sup>49</sup> This is essential to point out in order not to thoughtlessly collate historically distinct tendencies.

Following Morel, degeneration discourse became more widespread and what was initially a rather individualized pathology that came to an end by rendering the family line sterile in roughly four generations<sup>50</sup> morphed into a narrative whereby society itself was identified as a site of an “infection”, thereby implying a “vicious circle of causes and effects, [in which] a poisonous society infected the individual, the individual passed on the infection to the offspring and the degenerate offspring reinfected society.”<sup>51</sup> There was, on a larger scale, a tendency to identify degeneration with urban life and the changes it brought about. One thinks here of Engels and his observations in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Take, for instance, Engels quoting from a contemporary newspaper, describing the life in the slums:

“But let all men, whether of theory or of practice, remember this — that

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. p. 49.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p. 47.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p. 49–50.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p. 40–41.

<sup>50</sup> Kelly Hurley, “Hereditary Taint and Cultural Contagion: The Social Etiology of Fin-de-siècle Degeneration Theory,” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 14, no. 2 (January 1, 1990): 193–214, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08905499008583317>, p. 193.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 196. In any case, as Hurley also points out in the footnote to this quote that a simplistic typology that equates Morel to a strictly individualized narrative would be wrong.

within the most courtly precincts of the richest city on GOD'S earth, there may be found, night after night, winter after winter, women—young in years—old in sin and suffering—outcasts from society—ROTTING FROM FAMINE, FILTH AND DISEASE. Let them remember this, and learn not to theorize but to act. God knows, there is much room for action now-a-days.”<sup>52</sup>

As Kelly Hurley quotes from J.P. Freeman Williams' *The Effect of Town Life on the General Health*, urban life seemed to deplorable and degenerative that sooner or later all family lines degenerated in London, making “a pure Londoner of the fourth generation” a possibility.<sup>53</sup> This would then increase the feeling that the nation was doomed to economic failure, since the belief that urban environment causes hereditary degeneration necessitated future economic problems, in Richard Soloway's words: “Once the great towns took their debilitating toll on the new inhabitants, would there be sufficient healthy stock remaining to replenish their degenerating numbers?”<sup>54</sup> Galton himself seems to have been a believer in urban causes of degeneration, writing once in 1873 about a “decay” that threatened a significant decline in urban populations against that of the country, expecting that urban dwellers would amount to “less than half as numerous as those of the country folk after one century, and only about one fifth as numerous after two centuries”, and then on 1903 to again conclude, this time prompted by the Boer War that “towns sterilize rural vigour”.<sup>55</sup>

It was not only in England that concerns propped up by the troubles of urban life were seen as both causes and effects of degeneration. In Italy, for instance, fears of degeneration were results of a national urban/rural divide, whereby the North, seeing itself as the developed, industrialized counterpart to an impoverished South in the wake of reunification came to enunciate similarly alarmist biological theories of crime and delinquency.<sup>56</sup>

This post-unification Italy gave birth to one of the more infamous figures of 19th century science, Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909). Lombroso is the inventor of what is known as criminal

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<sup>52</sup> Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, trans. W.O. Henderson and W.H. Chaloner (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1958). p. 39.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. p. 196.

<sup>54</sup> Richard A. Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration: Eugenics and the Declining Birthrate in Twentieth-Century Britain* (UNC Press Books, 2014), p. 39.

<sup>55</sup> Both quoted in: Ibid. p. 40.

<sup>56</sup> Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, p. 4.

anthropology, the pseudo-scientific field of identifying anatomical features with criminal behavior. Lombroso set out to popularize his new science in his “L’uomo delinquent [Criminal Man]”, first published in 1876 and expanded onto four subsequent editions. One particular concept in Lombroso warrants attention with respect to degeneration: atavism. Someone who was deemed atavistic “reproduces in his person the ferocious instincts of primitive humanity and the inferior animals”, or quite as Stephen Jay Gould aptly puts, it meant that crime was the result of “evolutionary throwbacks in our midst”.<sup>57</sup> Lombroso’s physiognomic theories of delinquency that found “monkeylike anomalies” in skulls resonates well with the theme of degeneration, in that they both conceived of hidden, subterranean forces within the individual threatening dissolution.<sup>58</sup> If, in the French case, such degeneration was interpreted less fatalistically and attributed to the environment, Lombroso’s much more hereditarian approach would still yield, in many ways, considerably reformist approaches to crime, such as parole or early release from prison.<sup>59</sup> In Lombroso’s theory, one was born a criminal, and did not become one solely due to environmental influences. One of the easiest ways to get Lombroso’s message is to point out that Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* was fashioned in an explicitly Lombrosian manner – and Stoker even mentioned Lombroso by name, having his character exclaim that “the Count is a criminal and of criminal type. Lombroso and Nordau would so classify him.”<sup>60</sup> Just like the infamous Count Dracula, the criminal was marked by hereditary degeneration outwardly as well as infected with it internally in its atavism.

One disciple of Lombroso, whose characterization of the fin-de-siècle gave this subchapter its name was Max Nordau (1849-1923).<sup>61</sup> Nordau was a peculiar character, and perhaps did the most to popularize theories of degeneration more than anyone else mentioned in this chapter. Nordau’s famous work, “Entartung [Degeneration]” was first published in 1892 and was dedicated to Cesare Lombroso. In this dedication, Nordau is quite straightforward: while thanking Lombroso for developing the theory of degeneration “with so much genius”, he quickly states that no one had yet

<sup>57</sup> Both quotes from: Stephen Jay Gould, *Mismeasure of Man* (WW Norton, 1996), p. 124.

<sup>58</sup> Lombroso suggests such “monkeylike anomalies” are found in some of the skulls he examined. Quoted in: Cesare Lombroso, *Criminal Man* (Duke University Press, 2006), p.45.

<sup>59</sup> Gould, *Mismeasure of Man*, p. 141.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in: Herman, *Idea of Decline*, p. 124.

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in: P. M. Baldwin, “Liberalism, Nationalism, and Degeneration: The Case of Max Nordau,” *Central European History* 13, no. 2 (June 1980): 99–120, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938900009067>. p. 112.

studied degeneration in “the domain of art and literature”; “Degenerates are not always criminals, prostitutes, anarchists, and pronounced lunatics; they are often authors and artists” goes the famous quote from this page.<sup>62</sup> In other words, Nordau set out to do for philosophy, art and culture what his predecessors had done for crime and pathology. It is a large tome, spanning some six-hundred pages, covering pretty much any relevant cultural phenomenon from its time. In Nordau, degeneration now took another shape, to Morel’s germ-like, invisible threat and Lombroso’s visibly disfigured, anatomically misshapen criminals, Nordau added the figure of the exhausted, “de-vitalized” and nervous urban dweller. In his imagination, the fin-de-siecle urban dweller “breathes an atmosphere charged with organic detritus; he eats stale, contaminated, adulterated food; he feels himself in a state of constant nervous excitement.”<sup>63</sup> Nordau condemns any and every type of art, literature and philosophy he dislikes as degenerate, ranging from Friedrich Nietzsche to expressionist painting.

What is important about Nordau, for the purposes of this thesis is not the content of his invectives, but rather the rest of his thought. As I have shown with the previous thinkers of degeneration, matters are not as simple as degeneration theory being an offshoot of certain conservatives. In Nordau, we find not only a liberal, but also a committed rationalist as well as an early proponent of Zionism. P. M. Baldwin paints him as a figure caught between his liberal convictions and nationalist tendencies which he thought to be irreconcilable.<sup>64</sup> His liberalism was staunch and fed by a fervent rationalism: “natural evolution requires of man that he suppresses instinct and emotion in favor of reason [...]”, as Baldwin interprets him.<sup>65</sup> Evolution, naturally occurring through making adaptation possible by way of “vital energy” is contrasted to revolution – the effort to adapt the world to our wants.<sup>66</sup> Interestingly, his liberalism precluded him from identifying society as an overarching organism – a move that would fit the narrative of degeneration quite well.<sup>67</sup> In any case, his con-

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<sup>62</sup> All quotes from: Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, trans. George L. Mosse (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), p. v

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. p. 35.

<sup>64</sup> Baldwin, “Liberalism, Nationalism, and Degeneration”, p. 100.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. p. 101.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. p. 102.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 102–103.

clusions regarding degeneration proceed naturally from his rationalist position. Nordau recoiled against what Carl Schorske called the “psychological man”, that is, the emergent emphasis on the emotional, instinctual aspect of humanity.<sup>68</sup> How was a committed rationalist and fervent liberal to take Nietzsche’s attacks against reason and the unified subject without ire? Such a clash between a traditionally liberal attitude and emerging modernity once again called upon the myth of degeneration. Culture had atrophied, the modern man, breathing detritus and overstimulated, caught up in the “vertigo and the whirl of the times” could hope for no more progress.<sup>69</sup>

In conclusion, degeneration theory was not just an outgrowth of racism – in that it did not only apply to the racial “other” and the outsiders of “civilization”, rather, as Daniel Pick puts it, it can be understood as the result of an internal colonization, brought about by urbanization, industrialization and proletarianization.<sup>70</sup> The degenerate was, if we think with Nordau, the modern subject par excellence – the residuum of modernity’s onslaught against established ways of life.<sup>71</sup> As the initial paragraphs tried to show, it was not only the individual that was threatened with degeneration; the universe itself, hitherto thought of as infinite, turned out to be in a process of decay towards a heat-death.

Degeneration did not become a scientifically accepted fact, and it saw significant backlash in its own time. Therefore, my aim here is not to suggest that degeneration directly motivated eugenicists – which would warrant an entire dissertation – but rather to recount this particular mood as an indication of the vastness of feelings of hopelessness, insecurity and ambiguity as the century progressed towards its end. Understanding degeneration is not only important to appreciate the cultural backdrop of a variety of 20th century movements – among which eugenics features – but also to explore differences across national contexts. The English, fearing the over-reproduction of the lower classes had to develop a different culture of eugenics than the French, whose eugenics is a historical specificity in the sense that it was still caught up in similar population decline anxieties found in the 19th century degenerationist discourse. Degeneration also contributed to the med-

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<sup>68</sup> Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-De-Siecle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (Vintage, 1981), p. 4.

<sup>69</sup> Quoted in: Baldwin, “Liberalism, Nationalism, and Degeneration”, p. 107.

<sup>70</sup> Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*

<sup>71</sup> I use residuum intentionally: this term was then applied to the multitude of the lower classes by the eugenicists.

icalization of social and political problems: first, its inception in the medico-psychological discipline undoubtedly assigned the life-sciences a premium currency in diagnosing and treating a wide range of phenomena. Second, by establishing an organic metaphor, it drew a continuity between the individual and the social body; using degeneration as the common enemy. Finally, on a broader cultural note, can one suggest the existence of links between this gloomy atmosphere of the fin-de-siècle and the subsequent uproar of the masculinist furor of the fascists, or in the hopeful outlook of the eugenicist to perfect the race through medical means, vying for the heights humanity could reach? I suggest, provisionally, that one indeed can. Such a link is important because eugenics came to be subordinated to dreams of national regeneration following World War One and the ethos of blood, soil and virility that it fostered.

### 2.3 Towards Perfection: John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Association of Perfectionists

The Oneida Association of Perfectionists was formally founded in 1848 by John Humphrey Noyes, about four miles south of Oneida, New York.<sup>72</sup> This was the high time of communitarian experiments in America, owing to the recent reception of Charles Fourier's utopian socialist thought into the American context through the works of Albert Brisbane.<sup>73</sup> Numerous similar communities with their own brands of regulating sexuality and marriage had popped up before and during Noyes' time. Noyes and the Oneida Association of Perfectionists stood out, since theirs could be considered the most successful out of these societies. In any case, it was a society founded in order to practice Noyes' particular brand of Christianity – that of perfectionism. John Humphrey Noyes

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<sup>72</sup> This is a somewhat arbitrary dating. Although the society published its first annual report in 1849 which formally pronounces 1848 as its year of inception, Noyes had already developed his doctrines earlier, and founded a smaller community in Putney which was a more elemental form of the later Oneida Association, attracted protest from the locals with the charge of adultery and was driven out. Nonetheless, this dating is corroborated both by Constance Noyes Robertson, *Oneida Community: An Autobiography, 1851-1876* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1970) as well as a contemporary account: A. L. Slawson, *Behind the Scenes; or, An Expose of Oneida Community. : Embracing Their Social and Sexual Relations, Spiritual Controls, Origin, and a Brief Sketch of Its Founder ..* (Oneida, N.Y.: A.L. Slawson, 1875).

<sup>73</sup> Carl J. Guarneri, "Reconstructing the Antebellum Communitarian Movement: Oneida and Fourierism," *Journal of the Early Republic* 16, no. 3 (1996): 463–88, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3124059>. p. 467.

had announced as early as 1833s that he was entirely devoid of sin, and had, as a result, been labeled insane and expelled from the Yale Theological Seminary in New Haven.<sup>74</sup>

Perfectionism for Noyes meant first and foremost, the purity of heart and character from which right intentions proceed. As Richard DeMaria quotes from Noyes: “a book may be true and perfect in sentiment, and yet be deficient in graces of style and typographical accuracy”.<sup>75</sup> In other words, his theology not only stressed right intentions over actions; it broke with any sort of objective conception of morality and fixed it completely to the character of the agent.<sup>76</sup> In short, this brand of perfectionism came to be the ground on which Noyes built his sexually polygamous community, which then led them to become incipient eugenicists later when the community finally became financially stable. Noyes, in claiming “[...] that the outward act of sexual connection is as innocent and comely as any other act, or rather if there is any difference in the character of outward acts, that this is the most noble and comely of all” had already laid solid theological foundations for his community.<sup>77</sup> Elsewhere, in the Bible Argument the implications of Noyes’ theology for marriage are laid out explicitly. The fifth proposition of the Bible Argument reads: “In the kingdom of heaven, the institution of marriage which assigns the exclusive. Possession of one woman to one man, does not exist.” Following this line of thought, the argument proceeds to claim that in the Kingdom of Heaven, “the intimate union of life and interests [...] extends through the whole body of believers, i.e. complex marriage takes place of the simple.”<sup>78</sup> Through these tenets, Noyes’ community of perfectionists practiced polygamy – one which was overseen diligently by Noyes himself.<sup>79</sup> Finally, this practice of polygamy rested on a hierarchy whereby younger males were

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<sup>74</sup> Constance Noyes Robertson, *Oneida Community: An Autobiography, 1851-1876* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1970). p. 5.

<sup>75</sup> Quoted in: Richard DeMaria, *Communal Love at Oneida: A Perfectionist Vision of Authority, Property, and Sexual Order* (New York : E. Mellen Press, 1978), <http://archive.org/details/communalloveaton0000dema>. p. 21.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. p. 21.

<sup>77</sup> Quoted in: Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality : Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1981), [http://archive.org/details/religionsexualit0000fost\\_x2t6](http://archive.org/details/religionsexualit0000fost_x2t6). p. 79–80.

<sup>78</sup> Oneida Association, “First Annual Report of the Oneida Association: Exhibiting Its History, Principles, and Transactions to Jan. 1, 1849,” 2000 1849, <https://library.syracuse.edu/digital/collections/f/FirstAnnualReportOfTheOneidaAssociation/>, p. 19.

<sup>79</sup> Martin Richards, “Perfecting People: Selective Breeding at the Oneida Community (1869–1879) and the Eugenics Movement,” *New Genetics and Society* 23, no. 1 (January 1, 2004): 47–71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1463677042000189615>. p. 51.

taught the method of male sexual continence by older women, and younger women gained sexual experience with older men higher up the spiritual ladder.<sup>80</sup>

This phenomenon of male sexual continence serves as a direct segue into the matter of eugenics. It was indispensable for the Oneida community's identity, since they regarded unplanned childbirth as a burden on both the male and the female; unnecessarily creating costs for men and inflicting serious physical costs on women.<sup>81</sup> An unfavorable attitude towards unplanned procreation is also evident in Noyes' pamphlet on male sexual continence, where he extols his method as allowing for free sexual expression between male and female without "undesired procreation and all the other evils incident to male incontinence. This is our fourth way, and we think it the better way."<sup>82</sup> The Oneida perfectionists regarded themselves as establishing the Kingdom of God on earth, and that since God owns all property on earth no private property is acceptable<sup>83</sup> and that upon joining the community all persons relegate their belongings to the community.<sup>84</sup> Similarly, the justification for polygamy was based on the premise that the community of believers ought to be allowed to love each other freely, since Christ and the New Testament required of humans a universal love for one another,<sup>85</sup> and that the idea of a monogamous, exclusive partnership is against both natural and the divine order of things.<sup>86</sup> As Anthony Wonderley argues, sexual intercourse was a means of worship and of uniting with God.<sup>87</sup>

In 1923, as part of the first volume of the Scientific Papers of the Second International Congress of Eugenics, two members of the Oneida Association of Perfectionists (hereinafter the Oneida community) published a summary of the eugenic experiments that took place between 1868

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid. 53. The method in question was simply the skill of having sexual intercourse without ejaculating.

<sup>81</sup> Anthony Wonderley, *Oneida Utopia: A Community Searching for Human Happiness and Prosperity* (Cornell University Press, 2017). p. 91–107.

<sup>82</sup> John Humphrey Noyes, *Male Continence, or Self-Control in Sexual Intercourse*, 1866 p. 4.

<sup>83</sup> Oneida Association, "First Annual Report of the Oneida Association : Exhibiting Its History, Principles, and Transactions to Jan. 1, 1849" (Syracuse University Library Department of Special Collections, n.d.), Oneida Community Collection, <https://library.syracuse.edu/digital/collections/ef/FirstAnnualReportOfTheOneidaAssociation/.p.14-15>

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. p. 16.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. p. 21.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. p. 24.

<sup>87</sup> Anthony Wonderley, *Oneida Utopia: A Community Searching for Human Happiness and Prosperity* (Cornell University Press, 2017). p. 99.

and 1879, shortly before its eventual dissolution.<sup>88</sup> The authors declare that about one hundred members of the community had joined the experiment, begetting fifty-eight children.<sup>89</sup> These fifty-eight children, referred to as stirpicults, reportedly demonstrated certain improvements or advantages over the preceding generation of Oneida children. The authors happily report that “no deaf and dumb, blind, crippled or idiotic children were ever born in the Community”.<sup>90</sup> The eugenic character of this experiment is unmistakable. Noyes, in presenting the arguments for eugenics in his essay on Scientific Propagation uses phrases such as improving the stock, and indeed the names the practice stirpiculture from the Latin for “stock” (stirp). The authors of the 1923 report recall petitions signed by both young men and women and addressed to Noyes where they offer themselves “to be used in forming any combinations that may seem to you [Noyes] desirable” or declare that they have “no rights or personal feelings in regard to childbearing, which shall in the slightest degree oppose or embarrass him [Noyes] in his choice of scientific combinations” and finally that they will “if necessary, become martyrs to science, and cheerfully resign all desire to become mothers, if [...] Mr. Noyes deem us unfit.”<sup>91</sup>

To understand how much the language and ethos of eugenics penetrated into Noyes’ mind is important in order not to stress the point that it was, in the self-interpretation of Noyes, a bona-fide practice of eugenics and not one that merely happened to mirror it. First and foremost, Noyes was fervently scientific in his thinking, which is already evident in his full acceptance of the phrenological vocabulary and practices.<sup>92</sup> Secondly, Noyes’ essay accompanying this eugenic experiment, *Scientific Propagation*, speaks the language of eugenics of his time. Noyes quotes liberally from the *Republic*, as well as incorporating multiple-page long quotes from Darwin. Themes such as responsibility to further generations and devices like establishing parallels with animal

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<sup>88</sup> Hilda Herrick Noyes and George Wallingford Noyes, “The Oneida Experiment at Stirpiculture,” in *Scientific Papers of the Second International Congress of Eugenics: Held at American Museum of Natural History, New York, September 22-28, 1921 / (Vol. 1), by International Congress of Eugenics (2nd: 1921: New York) (Baltimore: Williams & Williams, 1923)*, 374–87. *Although the Oneida Community dissolved due to inner tensions as the Christian utopian movement that we will elaborate on shortly, it survives to this very day as a cutlery and silverware manufacturer!*

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. p. 376.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. p. 380.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. p. 376 brackets are my additions to clarify.

<sup>92</sup> Anthony Wonderley, *Oneida Utopia*, p. 52-53 tells the story of Noyes undergoing a phrenological personality analysis, for instance.

breeding constitute two lucid examples of the extent to which Noyes employs the early eugenicist discourse.<sup>93</sup> Noyes' relentless spirit of self-improvement on the one hand and his fervent scientism on the other would have left him little room to disagree with one of the most eminent scientific theories of his time. Furthermore, despite the non-coercive and at times quite progressive aspects of the Oneida Community, two themes linger that still link their eugenics with the broader movement later in the 20th century: the ethos of systematic, poietic improvement towards perfection. As I will further elaborate in the concluding section; eugenics can be problematized solely on the basis of this optimizing attitude, even if other, more troubling practices are absent. Undoubtedly, the petitions described above, which show significant levels of deference to the leader further solidify the argument against eugenics – even where it is not coercive, it seems to foster an unhealthy attitude in individuals both towards their selves and the community at large.

## 2.4 Contesting Eugenics in the Twentieth Century: Further Examples

In the previous chapters, I have mostly focused on nineteenth-century forerunners and backgrounds of eugenics. This is due to two reasons: one, most historiography of eugenics includes a passing mention of Galton's publications and perhaps some words on the Oneida experiments yet usually under-emphasizing such nineteenth-century constructs like degeneration theory or the general conceptual and semantic universe in which eugenic theories were conceived. Even if the narrative of degeneration never became a scientific fact or the Oneida perfectionists acknowledged by other eugenicists as legitimate forebears; nonetheless these are significant clues to the cultures of scientism in different contexts. Secondly, this decision was motivated by the fact that the more "familiar" history of eugenics is by now quite well-known, needing barely a mention.

Nevertheless, in this chapter, I will present an overview of eugenics as it occurred in the twentieth century, with a view to reconstructing this story as not one of eugenics' uncontested rise but bringing forth those moments of negotiation and challenge coming from various camps. The main aim of this chapter will be to support the argument that a sizeable chasm separates historical eu-

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<sup>93</sup> John Humphrey Noyes, "Essay on Scientific Propagation / by John Humphrey Noyes ; with an Appendix Containing a Health Report of the Oneida Community, by Theodore R. Noyes" (Syracuse University Library Department of Special Collections, n.d.), Oneida Community Collection, <https://library.syracuse.edu/digital/collections/e/EssayOnScientificPropagation/>, pages 6 and 3, respectively

genics and contemporary questions, due to considerable differences in the intellectual climate, organizational nature and political contexts in which the two developed. Finally, it will set the stage for the conclusion, where I will reflect on one significant aspect which can be said to be present across historical eugenics and today's discussions: the dream of a perfect mankind.

Eugenics is usually conflated with one of its nineteenth-century predecessors – social Darwinism. In the rough reading, the premise of “survival of the fittest” is taken as a eugenic motto. However, this is an erroneous reading, more misleading than it is useful. Maurizio Meloni cautions against this conflation on the account that social Darwinism was a laissez-faire based, individualist program that took after the Lamarckian belief that the habits of the successful could be made “the biology of the next generation”.<sup>94</sup> Although this typology can be challenged as simplistic, such a discussion falls entirely outside the scope of this thesis.<sup>95</sup> In any case, it is reasonable to argue that social Darwinism was used by certain laissez-faire industrialists to advance their economic interests, legitimating it on the basis of a supposed law of natural selection. Kühl contends that the preachers of social Darwinism had failed to deliver on the promise, seeing that the lowest classes “suffered under catastrophic conditions” and yet were not “eradicated through the process of natural selection.”<sup>96</sup> Such a failure of natural selection would then call for what many eugenicists referred to as rational selection. In other words, if social Darwinism was laissez-faire, then eugenics can be thought of as a centrally planned economy. Of course, overlaps existed between eugenics, social Darwinism and degenerationist thinking. After all, prior to its institutionalization in the various eugenicist societies and journals, eugenics was hardly a well-defined, official program.

At the turn of the century, one important event occurred that was indispensable for the articulation of a eugenic faith. Gregor Mendel's (1822–1884) findings were rediscovered in 1900, further solidifying the view that took heredity to be fixed at birth and unaffected by environmental factors (hence precluding the inheritance of acquired characteristics as well). In secondary litera-

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<sup>94</sup> Meloni, p. 91–92.

<sup>95</sup> A brief look into the historiography of social Darwinism reveals that indeed matters are more complex than such a simplistic typology. See: Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860-1945: Nature as Model and Nature as Threat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), for such discussions; esp. the Introduction.

<sup>96</sup> S. Kühl, *For the Betterment of the Race: The Rise and Fall of the International Movement for Eugenics and Racial Hygiene* (New York, UNITED STATES: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/centraleurope-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1431293>, p. 13.

ture on eugenics, this is referred to as “hard hereditarian”, as opposed to the “soft” approach of Lamarckian assumptions. Mendel had published his research in the nineteenth century, but his work had since then been forgotten. As Edward Edelson quotes from a biologist writing in 1903, it was perhaps “the spirit of the age” in which Mendel wrote that proved unreceptive to his findings.<sup>97</sup> Towards the end, the nineteenth century would be kinder to Mendel, seeing as such hard hereditarian views were in the ascendancy – with Francis Galton and August Weismann (1834–1914) leading the way.<sup>98</sup> Galton already prefigured a considerable chunk of later genetics in his thought, but most of what he had to say was either published outside of the mainstream journals or were altogether unpublished.<sup>99</sup> Weismann proposed a mechanism that disputed the very possibility of “soft heredity”, suggesting that heredity worked through what he called the “germ plasm” which was completely isolated from the rest of the body virtually from the beginning.<sup>100</sup> Therefore, even if the rest of the somatic cells were affected by the environment, these effects would not translate to heritable material. In summary, already before the rediscovery of Mendel, hard heredity was on the ascendancy, and Mendel’s work “sealed the case”, as Diane Paul puts it.<sup>101</sup>

Recalling Freeden’s approach, it is important to dwell on the status of hard heredity in its relation to eugenic thought and determine whether it is a core, peripheral or adjacent idea. On the one hand, the image of eugenics leads one to think that hard heredity is a core characteristic of eugenic thought. After all, if biology is destiny and heredity is fixed, why worry about the environment? But to suggest that hard heredity was a core idea of eugenics would imply no alternative really existed. This is historically inaccurate since a Lamarckian strand of eugenics is consistently present. In the pre-World War I era, French eugenics favored such an approach, for instance. Myths of degeneration covered in the preceding chapter had significant and long-lasting effects on the French eugenics movement. Additionally, fin-de-siecle France experienced considerable anxieties about its declining population, especially in the face of a powerful and booming military rival – Germa-

<sup>97</sup> Edward Edelson, *Gregor Mendel, and the Roots of Genetics* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). p. 78

<sup>98</sup> Diane B. Paul, *Controlling Human Heredity: 1865 to the Present* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanity Books, 1995)., p. 41.

<sup>99</sup> Mayr, *Growth of Biological Thought* p. 695.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. p. 700.

<sup>101</sup> Paul, *Controlling Human Heredity*, p. 48.

ny.<sup>102</sup> As Fogarty and Osborne point out, such an experience would have been novel to the French in a historical sense; their fall from being the most populous nation of the previous century into experiencing demographic decline was shocking.<sup>103</sup> Such fears of depopulation resonated with broad segments of the population, and as William Schneider informs us, led to alliances between Catholics, nationalist conservatives for the natalist cause, as well as prompting others to form initiatives against alcoholism, tuberculosis and venereal disease calling for government action.<sup>104</sup> Such was the general backdrop to the emergence of the French eugenics movement at the end of the nineteenth century. However, what rendered the French case special was the presence of a more or less “homegrown” tradition of eugenics – to put it loosely – which left its imprint on the subsequent culture of eugenics.

This form of homegrown “eugenics” was first conceived by a physician named Alfred Caron in 1865 under the name puericulture.<sup>105</sup> Puericulture largely meant caring for infants, with a view to scientifically improving the species.<sup>106</sup> However, Caron and this early form of “eugenics” received no real attention at the time. It was Adolphe Pinard (1844-1934), the doyen of the French eugenics scene and a prominent obstetrician who revived it near the turn of the century.<sup>107</sup> Pinard was convinced that mothers who were exposed to better environments gave birth to children who were properly developed and therefore larger than their counterparts belonging to less fortunate mothers.<sup>108</sup> Accordingly, he defined this revived form of puericulture as “knowledge relative to the reproduction, the conservation and the amelioration of the human species”.<sup>109</sup> In this proto-eugenic moment, the “distinctiveness” of the French brand is already present: Pinard’s puericulture was still concerned with the environment and the effects it had on the infant. Pinard struck a note

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<sup>102</sup> William H. Schneider, “The Eugenics Movement in France, 1890-1940,” in *The Wellborn Science: Eugenics in Germany, France, Brazil, and Russia*, by Mark B. Adams (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 69–109. p. 70.

<sup>103</sup> Richard S. Fogarty and Michael A. Osborne, “Eugenics in France and the Colonies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics*, by Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine (Oxford University Press, 2010), 332–46. p. 335.

<sup>104</sup> Schneider, “The Eugenics Movement in France, 1890-1940”, p. 71.

<sup>105</sup> William H. Schneider, “Puericulture, and the Style of French Eugenics,” *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences* 8, no. 2 (1986): 265–77., p. 266.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid. p. 267.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid. p. 268.

<sup>109</sup> Schneider, “The Eugenics Movement in France, 1890-1940”, p. 72.

with the broader context of demographic anxieties and was appointed to the Senate Commission on Depopulation in 1902.<sup>110</sup> The course of French eugenics followed this rather “ecumenical” line with such a Lamarckian bent roughly until the First World War. According to Schneider, this prevalence of an environmentalist focus through Lamarckism fit especially well into the “political and social philosophy of the French Third Republic.”<sup>111</sup>

The example of France where soft heredity remained influential as an argument for excluding hard heredity from the ideological core of eugenics can be disputed on account of its specificity in light of its distinctive scientific culture. Such an argument may point out, for instance, it was not only hard heredity that failed to get traction in France, but such influential ideas like Darwinism were also met with suspicion in France precisely due to its particular scientific culture.<sup>112</sup> However, Lamarckian interpretations did not resonate only with the French. There was, for instance, a number of African-American writers who, in reacting against the onslaught of miscegenation laws and racist eugenics sought to repurpose the eugenicist discourse as a means of self-defense. Stressing the importance of environment over heredity was not the only strategy used by African American writers – but this does not detract from the argument. As Hasian Jr. states, some African American intellectuals contested the hard hereditarian view that implied racial purity for whites as a logical conclusion with both calling the validity of this race science into question<sup>113</sup> and then with a “reform eugenics” with an emphasis on the environment.<sup>114</sup> Albert Beckham, for instance, repurposed the language of eugenics into a broader social reformist program.<sup>115</sup> Lamarckian counter-narratives also found use in the feminist struggles.<sup>116</sup> American feminists emphasized the importance of education, natal care and good parenting.<sup>117</sup> Finally, such environmental, Lamarckian arguments

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<sup>110</sup> William H. Schneider, “Puericulture, and the Style of French Eugenics,” p. 268.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. 73.

<sup>112</sup> Fogarty and Osborne, “Eugenics in France and the Colonies” p. 335

<sup>113</sup> Marouf Arif Hasian, *The Rhetoric of Eugenics in Anglo-American Thought* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996). p. 60–61.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid. p. 64.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid. 65 It is also important to note that Beckham thought African Americans could benefit from eugenics in order to “eliminate the unfit and perpetuate the fit”. Quoted on the same page.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. p. 80.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid. p. 85.

found resonance with British liberals as well, in calling for better laws regarding health insurance, children and the poor.<sup>118</sup>

The above examples of eugenic reconfigurations say two important things about eugenics. Firstly, they point towards its highly contested nature, as it has been central to my narrative thus far. Secondly, they warrant at least the limited conclusion that it is indeed possible to imagine eugenics without hard heredity at its core. In addition to the cases mentioned above, the case of German eugenics and Soviet eugenics are instructive in demonstrating further just how conflicted eugenics was. The former case is interesting insofar as it shows the ultimately atrocious form eugenics took in the Third Reich was not the only historical possibility. The second case is illustrative of how in the unique context of the USSR, conventional typologies tend to fail. Finally, I present the attempts at combining Christianity and eugenics and the backlash it produced. These case studies will demonstrate that institutional and epistemological consolidation did not manage to entirely monopolize eugenics at any point.

Eugenics had, similar to the French case, somewhat of a local character in Germany as well. It developed in the shadow of formidable socialist presence and therefore a critical attitude towards “unfettered capitalism.”<sup>119</sup> Another significant aspect of German eugenic thought is – perhaps unsurprisingly – the presence of racism from its early beginnings. However, precisely because of its intuitive appeal, this racial aspect of German eugenics should be handled with care. As Sheila Faith Weiss, one of the most eminent historians of German eugenics cautions against such a totalizing view, and states that prior to Hitler’s rise, eugenics “captured the interest of individuals whose allegiance spanned the breadth of the Wilhelmine and Weimar political spectrum.”<sup>120</sup> What makes Germany a notable case, despite the status of white supremacy being virtually ‘accepted fact’ across Europe was adherence to theories of Nordic supremacy. While some prominent figures of the German eugenics movement were believers in the Aryan myths, they never failed to meet challenges

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid. p. 117.

<sup>119</sup> Loren R. Graham, “Science and Values: The Eugenics Movement in Germany and Russia in the 1920s,” *The American Historical Review* 82, no. 5 (1977): 1133–64, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1856342>, p. 1135.

<sup>120</sup> Sheila Faith Weiss, “The Race Hygiene Movement in Germany, 1904-1945,” in *The Wellborn Science: Eugenics in Germany, France, Brazil, and Russia*, by Mark B. Adams (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 8–68, p. 9.

and pushbacks from non-racist eugenicists, of whom there was no shortage.<sup>121</sup> The dispute surrounding what to call the science of improving humanity is an excellent example of how deep the fissures ran in the German context. Eugenics was somewhat of a later addition to the German vocabulary. In its stead, the Germans used Rassenhygiene (race hygiene). Two alternatives were possible in addition to the Germanization of eugenics (Eugenik): Erbhygiene (erb: heritage, legacy) and Fortpflanzungshygiene (fortpflanzung: propagation, breeding), with the latter being a suggestion by the socialist Alfred Grotjahn (1869-1931), as a measure against racist interpretations.<sup>122</sup> A similar issue concerned the word Rassenhygiene itself. Another anti-racist eugenicist, Wilhelm Schallmayer (1857-1919), found the term offensive and suggested Rasse-hygiene instead. The omission of the “n” here signified the inclusion of the entire human species within the term race (Rasse).<sup>123</sup> Here, Graham notes that towards the end of the 1920s, as the political atmosphere became more and more charged; eugenics came to be associated with the left; while the extreme right tended to favor Rassenhygiene.<sup>124</sup> Similarly, when two eugenicist organizations merged, the anti-racists managed to secure a compromise with the Aryanists, settling on including the word “eugenik” only in brackets: thus the society was named Deutsche Gesellschaft für Rassenhygiene (Eugenik).<sup>125</sup> Erasing these moments of dispute, especially against the racist tendencies in the eugenics movement is dangerous. Instead, it has to be emphasized that Hitler’s version of eugenics was victorious despite resistance and the presence of alternative visions.

The German case is then illustrative in terms of demonstrating that a finer-grained view tends to challenge the conventional story of eugenics – even where racist eugenics seems a foregone conclusion, it met with forceful resistance. Another case which compels one to reconsider the possibility of any comprehensive typology is the story of Soviet eugenics. Interestingly, in Russia as well there was a home-brewed proto-eugenics that developed independently from Galton. Vasily Florinsky (1834-1899), an obscure gynecologist from the Imperial Medical-Surgical Academy had

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid. p. 10.

<sup>122</sup> Graham, “Science and Values”, p. 1138.

<sup>123</sup> Both Weiss and Graham include this episode. Weiss, “The Race Hygiene Movement in Germany”, p. 33; Graham, “Science and Values”, p. 1139.

<sup>124</sup> Graham, “Science and Values” p. 1139.

<sup>125</sup> C.f. Weiss, “The Race Hygiene Movement in Germany” p. 36; Graham “Science and Values”, p. 1139–1140.

penned a tract on consanguineous marriage and its ills entitled *Human Perfection and Degeneration* in 1866.<sup>126</sup> Imperial Russia also imbibed on the latest developments in the sciences coming from the West, and translations of major eugenic writings were available before the revolution.<sup>127</sup> The earlier generation of Russian geneticists constituted the continuity between Imperial and Soviet cultures of science; and eugenics mainly flourished under the auspices of institutes for genetic research. After the Revolution, eugenic research was mainly in the form of examining genealogies (in other words, pen-and-paper eugenics). Eugenics in its familiar form never really flourished in the USSR, apart from one Mikhail Volotskoi (1893-1944) who suggested sterilization only to be quickly dismissed by one of the senior leaders of Soviet eugenics, Vasily Filipchenko (1882-1930).<sup>128</sup> A eugenic policy was advanced which called for the use of artificial insemination but was not adopted. Having developed under the wings of geneticists, eugenics in the USSR by then adopted the scientific norm regarding heredity; Mendelism. Of course, fixed heredity attracted the ire of the Bolsheviks in that it went against the Marxist doctrine of the social determination of man. Vasily Slepikov (1899-1937), a Lamarckian Marxist unleashed a critique on the eugenics as anti-revolutionary, bourgeois science.<sup>129</sup> This attack on eugenics and Mendelism as bourgeois prompted the seasoned geneticist, Filipchenko to turn the argument on its head and suggest that it was indeed Lamarckism that carried catastrophic implications for the Revolution. What would the implication of inheritance of acquired characteristics mean to the prospects of the proletariat, exposed throughout history to the most wretched conditions? <sup>130</sup> Ultimately, Filipchenko and Mendelism did not win in Russia – as history shows, an extreme form of Lamarckism came to dominate the Soviet intellectual space from the 1930s on: Lysenkoism. The Soviet example is a particularly engaging episode in the contested history of eugenics; showing how Lamarckism could be interpreted as having progressive implications in one context; and quite the opposite in another.

Another unlikely eugenic dream occurred in the United States and Britain; this time captur-

<sup>126</sup> Mark B. Adams, "Eugenics in Russia," in *The Wellborn Science: Eugenics in Germany, France, Brazil, and Russia*, by Mark B. Adams (Oxford University Press, 1990), 153–216. p. 170.

<sup>127</sup> Nikolai Kremontsov, "From 'Beastly Philosophy' to Medical Genetics: Eugenics in Russia and the Soviet Union," *Annals of Science* 68, no. 1 (January 1, 2011): 61–92, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00033790.2010.527162>. p. 65.

<sup>128</sup> Adams, "Eugenics in Russia", p. 175.

<sup>129</sup> Graham, "Science and Values", p. 1150.

<sup>130</sup> Adams "Eugenics in Russia", p. 177; Graham, "Science and Values", p. 1152.

ing the imaginations of some clergy. One of the forerunners of eugenic Christianity was the British priest, Cambridge professor and Dean of the St. Paul's Cathedral in London; William Ralph Inge (1860-1954). An essay of his called *Some Moral Aspects of Eugenics* appeared in the inaugural issue of the periodical *Eugenics Review* in 1909. There Inge argues that the aims of eugenics and that of Christianity are coincidental.<sup>131</sup> Already in the opening pages, he states that “the whole future of humanity, immediate and distant” falls within the scope of his social ethics – and that if our mission is to make sure that “the largest possible men and women who to the largest possible extent realize the ideal of what a human being ought to be” exist on earth until time immemorial, we can neither neglect the future nor the present and the social ills that they contain.<sup>132</sup> Clearly, then, in his calls for taking biological responsibility for the sake of future generations, Inge remains entirely within the eugenic ethos. When he goes on to claim that in the absence of natural selection, eugenic legislation and practice, as means of rational selection offer the only means by which the “failures of mother nature” can be rectified. In fact, he suggests that our commitment to “humanitarian legislation”, is itself the reason for a eugenic corrective.<sup>133</sup>

Inge rejects, on overtly Biblical terms, the idea that certain sicknesses or misfortunes are God's will and therefore exempt from worldly intervention – quoting John 9:3 and Luke 13:4 to support his suggestion that malaise is no indicator of sin and wickedness.<sup>134</sup> If so, exclaims Inge, “if there is any scourge which does not strike the guilty only, which ruins innocent lives by the thousands”, those who wish to shy away from eugenic intervention in the name of Christianity have already failed Christ's teachings.<sup>135</sup> Therefore, the mission to rectify societal ills is in complete conformity with the Christian religion. Inge's understanding of Christianity is a perfectionist vision, reflected in his suggestion that the substance of Christian ethics amounts to the cultivation of a perfect

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<sup>131</sup> W. R. Inge, “Some Moral Aspects of Eugenics,” *The Eugenics Review* 1, no. 1 (April 1909): 26–36.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.* 27.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.* 29.

<sup>134</sup> “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.” and “Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” respectively. Both translations from the *New Oxford Annotated Bible*. **Inge's quotes are found on pages 32-33.**

<sup>135</sup> Inge “Some Moral Aspects of Eugenics”, p. 33.

human being.<sup>136</sup> In fact, in the closing pages, this strand of his thought reaches its culmination, where Inge goes as far as to suggest that Christianity is the very master morality that Nietzsche was after.<sup>137</sup> For Inge, Christianity has never shied away from extinguishing those who threatened the well-being of the flock, and that “there is nothing inconsistent with Christianity in imposing as well as enduring personal sacrifice where the highest welfare of the community is at stake.”<sup>138</sup> Like Noyes, Inge also maintained a fervent faith in science. In 1921 he returns to the pages of the *Eugenics Review*, unleashing his temper on what he terms the “the anti-scientific temper” of the age” and its hinderance against making eugenics a wide-ranging policy and reality.<sup>139</sup> He calls for a full-fledged scientific governance of society, and imagines that civilization will end if this road is not taken. Ultimately, he defaults back to the already familiar theme of rational selection in place of the inhibited natural selection once again and calls for a rigorous adherence to the scientific worldview: “It is for this scientific faith that we stand. We have no fixed dogmas. We should be ready to give up all our theories, and even to dissolve our Society, if science proved that we were on the wrong lines.”<sup>140</sup>

It was not only Inge who attempted to advance the cause of Christian eugenics, but he is perhaps the most militant and prolific representative of the movement. Eugenics and Christianity merged, apart from Inge’s ardently modernist Christianity; on the point of social reform and amelioration. Thus, another eugenicist priest, J.H.F. Peile suggested that the Church must extend its social responsibilities to the unborn: “the Church is willing and anxious to do everything in its power for children as soon as they are born, to fit them for the battle of life and for the Kingdom of Heaven.”<sup>141</sup> In this vision, eugenics appears as simply Christian care for future generations. Such beliefs had historical roots in Christianity: some believers of the Social Gospel movement, which was a particularly reformist, activist form of Christianity that emphasized the importance of social work and charity were also believers in the myth of degeneration, and saw its corrective in Chris-

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid. p. 33.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid. p. 34.

<sup>139</sup> W. R. Inge, “Eugenics and Religion,” *The Eugenics Review* 12, no. 4 (January 1921): 257–65. p. 257-258

<sup>140</sup> Ibid. p. 260.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid p. 5.

tianity.<sup>142</sup> Lastly, this brand of scientism and eugenics flourished in the Protestant and Anglican denominations specifically in relation to their anti-Catholic bias; and the 1930 papal encyclical *Casti Cannubii* which formally rejected eugenics gave them further anti-Catholic ammunition.<sup>143</sup>

In conclusion, this chapter offered a number of case studies that show, in various ways, the volatility of eugenics even in the twentieth century, the zenith of its institutionalization and worldwide adoption. It did so through selecting those instances where eugenics came to be repurposed by a variety of social actors and in the service of different ends. However, this selectivity also necessitates a final word, since my aim is by no means to assert a revisionist history of eugenics. This subchapter specifically and this thesis generally aims to simply show that a different eugenics was historically possible; and that the final form of it that we know did not come to the scene uncontested. Different avenues, visions and dreams were possible and if they did not come to fruition, this was neither accident nor fate; but simply the nature of politics. It also goes to show the difficulty associated with identifying the core of eugenics – even ideas like hard heredity, which was certainly instrumental to eugenics in that it meshes exceptionally well with its biological determinism; could be excluded. Furthermore, hard heredity could be disputed and re-asserted in a different political climate, for different reasons. Or, as in the German context, the word eugenics could come to articulate a left-leaning tendency against an overtly racist, right-wing program. In short, this chapter was a demonstration of the infinite malleability of eugenics and the difficulty of finding a stable core apart from a drive to systematically improve humans. This way of grasping eugenics is not only important for the historian of ideas, and certainly not only as a historical curiosity. It concerns the political scientist insofar as it shows that political ideas do not live and die by their internal, epistemic premises and coherence; they are not evaluated in terms of truth but rather inhabit a complex universe where they are constantly forced to evolve and answer to contingent, disparate and even contradictory challenges they face. The history of eugenics offers immense value to such an approach. As it became the point of intersection between political aims, scientific

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<sup>142</sup> Leif Tornquist, “Propagating the Divine: Protestant Modernism and the Rise of Anglo-American Eugenics” (Dissertation, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, 2016), <https://cdr.lib.unc.edu/concern/dissertations/ws859g305?locale=en>.

<sup>143</sup> Marouf Arif Hasian, *The Rhetoric of Eugenics in Anglo-American Thought* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996). p. 89–112.

assumptions as well as anxieties and dreams particular to the historical, national and political contexts in which it was submerged; eugenics had to grapple with a vast amount of such challenges as an ideology. Studying such changes with an approach such as that of Freedman's further would only yield more important conclusions for understanding the modus vivendi of ideas.

### 3. Perfection on Trial? Towards a Conclusion

#### 3.1 Sandel, Habermas and the Ethics of Enhancement

This thesis set out to understand eugenics as an infinitely multifarious, volatile and equivocal discourse. In doing so, the aim was to emphasize the difficulty of establishing unbroken continuities between the past and present – while at the same time providing a historical tale robust enough to challenge conventional historiographies that prevail in the contemporary debates. A second aim was to emphasize the difficulty of pinning eugenics down so as to use it as a pejorative or as a warning: such as Robert Sparrow’s epithet “not-so-new eugenics”. These deployments of eugenics as an unequivocally troubling project certainly appeal to most people’s intuitions and will continue to do so. Nonetheless, my contention is that academic debates, especially when they concern truly eugenic prospects, must move beyond such intuitions. The arguments presented thus far, by complicating the discussion, were aimed to do just that. This section, however, will turn the tables and emphasize one continuous strand throughout the history of eugenics; one which is arguably present in today’s eugenics in some form. This is the dream of human perfection; the idea that humans can, will or should strive to attain perfection or to come as close as possible to it. I will mostly invoke Michael Sandel’s arguments against human perfection in order to suggest that eugenics, even seen in the light of such a polyphonic history written with a view to demonstrate deviance from the common picture of it, may be rejected if one accepts the case against perfection.

Jürgen Habermas talks about the biographical background of his thought in an essay found in the volume *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*. He says that his lifelong “obsession” with the notions of “public space,” “discourse,” and “reason” has some roots in the difficulties and surgeries he experienced as a child to correct his cleft palate; a congenital disability that makes “normal” speech difficult.<sup>144</sup> He says that these experiences made him more sensitive to the dimensions of vulnerability and dependence, for instance. Undoubtedly, as the philosopher admits; had he been “perfect”, we may have been bereft of one of the most influential systematic thinkers of our day. That is to ask, provisionally; are not our flaws and lacks a substantial part of

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<sup>144</sup> Habermas, 12–13.

what makes us who we are? The view that takes maximizing the good and eliminating the “bad” as the key to a good life perhaps misses the point that without difficult experiences, inner tensions between who we wish to be and who we are consigned to be force us into internal turmoil, and perhaps it is in figuring out our own way out of these conflicts is the beginning of our personal ethics and character – thus indispensable to who we are and the life paths we choose to follow. This is the point at which we ought to begin doubting the premise of perfection; to ask what things we would deprive ourselves from, if we were to perfect ourselves.

Michael Sandel’s case against perfection rests on a similar disposition; for him, what renders the perfectionist ethos problematic is the attitude it fosters, an attitude of controlling the uncontrollable and a refusal to bow to the “unbidden.” Sandel recognizes that an ethic of giftedness underlies our sense of humility and fosters a spirit of solidarity and altruism.<sup>145</sup> He states that the drive for mastery over nature and the desire to remake it to fit our purposes will be corrosive for appreciating the given nature of human existence.<sup>146</sup> He agrees with Habermas in identifying something which is not at our disposal as the condition for our experience of freedom.<sup>147</sup> He contends that the problem with eugenics and genetic engineering is “the one-sided triumph of wilfulness over giftedness, of dominion over reverence, of moulding over beholding.”<sup>148</sup> In his view, parenthood is described as teaching humility and reverence for one’s children, and the premise of genetically engineering our children or ourselves to our liking erodes this possibility.<sup>149</sup> Finally, such an expansion of the field of our agency means also an surge of responsibility; since acquiring control over the hitherto chance-governed realms of existence implies ethical responsibility.<sup>150</sup> In response, a. van Niekerk argues that Sandel’s conclusions are unwarranted since Sandel mistakenly takes enhancement to be a teleological plan and that by assuming we can be the ones to halt humanity’s eons long process of technological and evolutionary progress, we judge our place in the

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<sup>145</sup> Sandel, p. 91, for instance

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p. 26–27.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid. p.81–82.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid. p. 85.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

history of species wrongly.<sup>151</sup> His second objection to Sandel is that by appealing to the treatment/enhancement dichotomy in the name of urging parents to be both accepting of children as they are and also encouraging biomedical intervention as treatment, Sandel posits a contradictory argument.<sup>152</sup> Another point he makes is, taking Sandel at his word regarding “giftedness”, what really stops a child from regarding his/her enhancements as gifts “that further require ‘shaping and directing’?”<sup>153</sup> Lastly, Nierke is not convinced with the case against mastery that Sandel invokes, on similar grounds as Frances Kamm: that mastery need not be such a pernicious end and indeed if sought for not its own sake but for agreeable ends, such a striving for mastery is not morally wrong.<sup>154</sup>

I remain unconvinced by the criticism against Sandel. Niekerk raises valid points, but to my mind, both him and Kamm miss the point of Sandel’s argument. Kamm, for instance, when she rejects Sandel’s views on the basis that acts and what sorts of moral attitudes they promote may be separable, fails to see that the implication of Sandel’s argument is nonetheless valid, since what sorts of social practices such acts lead towards does not depend on the agent’s intentions but to the overarching reality these acts produce and normalize.<sup>155</sup> Similarly, Niekerk’s point that there is nothing that particularly precludes the possibility of regarding enhancements as gifts overlooks the argument that to expand the field of human agency would put diminish our experience of freedom as such. If the premise that our experience of freedom depends on a shared powerlessness against the given nature of human life; then surely, regarding enhancements as gifts is by definition disqualified from being an effective rebuttal.

I wish to, however, emphasize a further point that Habermas touches on in his *The Future of Human Nature*; which is the argument that the premises upheld by genetic enhancement and eugenics imply profound shifts in terms of our “species ethics”; or in other words, they threaten to displace the current body of norms and givens on which our self-understanding as a species

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<sup>151</sup> Niekerk, p. 160.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid. p. 161.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid. p. 162.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid. 162–163.

<sup>155</sup> Kamm, p. 10.

is founded.<sup>156</sup> I suggest that this is a missing link in Sandel's critique of human enhancement; in that accepting Habermas' arguments leads to appreciating the fact that bio-technological progress puts us ever closer against the prospect of raising very fundamental questions about our nature as a species. I agree with Habermas that opening up the domain of brute luck to human agency will transform our notions of human freedom, liberalism and pluralism in important ways. Furthermore, greater appreciation of the fact that at the foundation of the possibility of us relating to each other as equals lies the givenness of human life; and a waning appreciation of life as such is itself threatening the premise of equality, even if the technological means of genetic engineering do not eventually materialize.

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<sup>156</sup> Future of Human Nature, p. 93.

### 3.2 Conclusion: Eugenics and Perfection

This thesis sought to answer the question of what eugenics meant, still means and may mean in the future; with a particular focus on the history of eugenics. In doing so, it reconstructed a highly volatile historical narrative, taking examples of eugenics that usually do not feature outside of history departments and journals. It aimed to show that most arguments that reject human enhancement on the basis of eugenics are susceptible to failure, due to the impossibly varying nature of eugenics as a historical phenomenon. It meant to argue that eugenics need not be authoritarian, racist, eliminationist or discriminative – and indeed, such eugenics were either possible or were in fact real cases. With its emphasis on the nineteenth century roots of eugenics, it also tried to emphasize the historical specificity of certain aspects taken as naturally belonging to eugenics and by adopting Michael Freedman's approach it tried to stress the pliability of eugenics.

What remains a core ideal to eugenics, however, is that quest for human perfection; a technocratic faith in systematically improving humankind. This chapter was an attempt to show that eugenics can be rejected on this basis alone. This argument is important for bioethicists and moral philosophers in that it returns to them a level of sovereignty by arguing that the historical forms of eugenics ought to be handled with extreme caution. If eugenics is such a historically volatile object, then bioethicists and moral philosophers may be avowed of the responsibility to discuss – often in a hasty and questionable way – the history of eugenics as a segue to contemporary debates. In other words, the emphasis on the unstable nature of eugenics tries to discourage precisely the kind of battle for continuities that the introductory segments laid out. One could be forgiven to suggest that what rendered eugenics trouble was both genetic and environmental. Genetically, it bequeathed a problematic faith in human perfection from the Enlightenment. Environmentally, it was rendered susceptible to a number of narratives that were themselves problematic (such as degeneration), which conferred to historical eugenics to a certain extent at least, its more questionable assumptions and practices. Therefore, a rejection of eugenics tout court is both historically and philosophically warranted.



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