The Eugenic Construction of Gender Identities in Interwar Romania

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Abstract: The socio-political context of interwar Romania represents a major historiographical challenge. Given the circumstances of increased political extremism, the Romanian eugenic movement gradually became ideologically entangled. The main objective of this paper is to highlight the discursive strategies used for constructing an ideologically desirable gender identity. In this respect, concepts such as national interest, gender role, ethnicity or biotypology of women will be analyzed as part of the broader Romanian eugenic project.

Keywords: interwar Romania, eugenics, gender identity, ethnicity, biotypology of women

Introduction

In the first part of the 20th century, Romania experienced major structural transformations both on a political and on a social level. Placed in a broader context of emerging Eastern European nation states at the end of World War I, the rise of Greater Romania as a distinct ethno-cultural and political space, presents itself in the form of a manifold phenomenon with multiple socio-political implications. The genesis of Greater Romania and its political development during the interwar period still represents a significant historiographical stake. Forging the idea of a Romanian nation state became, soon after the Great Union, a strategic idea for many political elites of that time. Institutionally and politically, Romania had to face a new type of challenge, namely that of pronounced ethno-cultural differences inside the societal corpus. This multicultural national profile represented the background for the future gradual deterioration of Romania’s interethnic relations and for the unexpected rise of homegrown nationalism.

A particular episode in this process of constructing the Romanian national identity was illustrated by the systematic attempts to promote an ideologized yet scientifically reinforced discourse about the idea of Romanianhood as a genuine national profile. Constructing the national identity by appealing to concepts such as ethnic exclusivity, Romanians and Non-Romanians, ballast minorities...
etc. represented the main feature of the Romanian eugenic school. If considered a kind of ideologized science, the Romanian eugenics becomes historically relevant because it facilitates a proper understanding of some conducted social politics in interwar Romania. In addition to the instrument-talization of ethno-cultural differences the eugenic discourse also operated some conceptual reconfigurations at the level of gender identity construction.

This paper tries to investigate the particular case of ideologically instrumentalized gender identities in the process of constructing Romania’s interwar national profile. The main objective in this analytical undertaking is to answer the following question: What is the ideological key-role played by the gender biotypology in interwar Romania and how did it become a matter of national interest?

The eugenic construction of gender identities became ideologically entangled and partially contributed as legitimizing factor to the so called Romanian ethnocratic state. (Sugar 2002: 227). In order to fulfill the objective of an ethnically based state the social and cultural politics were designed to serve the nation (perceived in its exclusivist meaning). The biopolitics of gender emerged therefore as most appropriated method for ensuring an ideologically much desired ethnic purity in Greater Romania. In this particular context gender categories (especially women) play a decisive role if approached from eugenic perspective. For example issues such as, the prevention of mixed marriages, the reproductive role of women and their responsibility to preserve the so called biological patrimony of the nation, became in the Romanian interwar context, not only eugenically encouraged guidelines but also ideologically motivated state politics.

The eugenic construction of national identity

Approaching the concept of national identity presupposes a complex theoretical framework. This term usually derives from two interconnected dimensions: politic and culture. Politically or culturally defined nations comprise both preexistent ethno-cultural heritage and discursive constructed political elements. The identitary profile of any given nation state does not represent a static instance but rather a continuously self-inventing factor which is semantically related to politics and culture (as previously highlighted):

“Scholarly discussions revolve principally around two conceptions of the nation and the lines of argumentation connected to them: the political ‘nation by an act of will’ (the German Willensnation) and the nation defined by culture (Kulturnation) which is often linguistically defined and ethnically based” (Wodak 2009: 18).

From a political point of view the eugenics appeared as a highly relevant opportunity to legitimate the state interventionism at the level of the society. The modern nation state had to intervene in order to artificially create an ideologically motivated sense of community. By using the allegedly scientific
character of eugenics the state managed to some extent to legitimize a new radical vision concerning social politics.

The political use of eugenics for resetting societal factors is considered to be dependent on the developing range of modern nation states. Depending on the accumulated range of the state and implicitly on its political power, the potential of social interventionism in the name of eugenic imperatives became significantly higher. Manifestations of eugenics can be traced back to the second half of the 20th century in Western Europe (Great Britain, Germany and France). Similar ideas spread to North America and increasingly became principles of social interventionism. The need of state authorities to conceive a coherent set of measures in order to manage a whole range of social problems, such as public health, demographics, economic growth, criminality etc., has to be understood in a broader context of strategic population politics.

All the inhabitants of a nation state, besides being rights-entitled individuals (citizens) protected by the political power, were, from the eugenic perspective, simply state resources or, as Paul Weindling suggests: “Population was the organic capital of the state.” (Weindling in Numbers et.al. 2010: 202). The idea behind this thesis which underlines the importance of population as any given resources administrated by the state, leads to the concept of governance optimization which automatically derives from the sovereign power of the state. The principles of governance optimization were theorized by Michel Foucault, who proposed the term of “governmentality” (Foucault 2009: 306), for describing the manner in which individuals became a target of the exercised power of sovereign states. From this particular perspective the eugenics represent nothing more than political attempts to optimize the governance.

Assuming that the population became the organic capital of the state (especially in the modern nation states), and the eugenics are targeted methods for correcting the imbalances at the level of society, a new feature of governmentality has to be taken into consideration, namely the struggle of most political stakeholders to rationalize the governance, simply because the existence of the nation state as a political and bureaucratic institution decisively depends on its organic capital, i.e. the population. Therefore gaining the acceptance of population for constructing a political sense of community, and consequently the idea of national identity, becomes a highly relevant objective for any rational governance. The idea of national identity can be politically triggered and stimulated but, it furthermore requires a socially constructed type of adhesion and devotedness which can only be obtained if the state manages to be constantly present and active at the level of people’s consciousness.

The national identity represents an instance of materialized fiction or narrative which is promoted in most cases discursively. The discourses on national identity are produces and reproduces as social practices. They eventually become dominant in an extended community and gradually internalized by the population: „Through discourses, social actors constitute objects of knowledge, situations and social roles as well as identities and interpersonal relations. (...) In other words, discourse constitutes social practice and is at the same time constituted by it” (Wodak 2009: 8).
Eugenics represents means of rationalizing the governance and constructing a politically defined national identity. By using its sovereign power the state intervenes at the social level and ameliorates, supervises or conducts different types of politics in order to improve the societal characteristics:

"The term ‘eugenics’ (from Greek: well-born) was introduced by Francis Galton in the 1880s, whose primary interest was selective breeding. Eugenics is based on the simple yet dangerous idea that those individuals with a positive genetic inheritance should be encouraged to breed while those with a negative hereditary profile should be discouraged from doing so, either through forced sterilization or judicial murder. This idea was popular among scientific positivists who believed that biology could resolve intractable social problems by applying rational principles of selection: if the weak, criminal or insane members of society could be eliminated through preventative measures or extermination, then the genetic inheritance of the population as a whole could be improved and the social costs of poverty, criminality and disease drastically reduced. In a utilitarian sense, the welfare of the greatest number would be increased by sacrificing ‘undesirable stock’ as a burden to the healthy majority". (Woodley 2010: 197).

At the end of the 19th and in the first half of the 20th century the eugenic movement reached an unprecedented extent mainly because it got entangled in the European nationalist phenomena. By monopolizing the legitimate political power, the nation states did not hesitate to use their bureaucratic apparatus for controlling various social aspects. Actually, the manner and extent in which one particular state could intervene and control its population was considered to be a relevant indicator for its sovereignty. The interventionist abilities thus determined the political power of the state.

The ascension of nationalism and its correlated sub-phenomena determined a so-called “biologization of political discourses” (Escudier in Neumann et.al., 2010: 76). Instances of eugenics as identifiable features in the nationalist rhetoric can be analyzed by taking into consideration various concurrent factors:

"The infusion of racial nationalism with eugenics between 1900 and 1940 is identifiable within three clusters of ideas and ideological commitments: a) the professionalization of medicine; b) the emergence of “scientific” versions of nationalism; and c) the fusion of völkisch biomedical ideology with anti-Semitism” (Turda, Weindling 2007: 14).

Ideologized eugenics can not systematically be understood without taking into account the theoretical and conceptual heritage representing the fundament of this movement. In addition to the concurrent factors mentioned above, the development of eugenics strongly relies on the following facts: a) Darwin’s theory of evolution (1859); b) The studies on the laws of heredity conducted by Gregor Mendel in 1865; c) Galton’s studies on human heredity first published in 1869 (Făcăoaru 1934: 155).

The connection between eugenics and ideology represents a highly controversial aspect. The European exponents of the eugenic movement perceived themselves not only as dedicated scientists but also as social activists. In this context, the preexistent assumed role as social activists determined the
later linkage to the political activism and in some cases to the ideological one. In case of eugenics there was a thin line between autonomous science, social engagement and political/ideological activism:

„Broadly speaking, eugenicists perceived themselves as both scientists and social activists. Most believed that there should be a close relationship between their research and its political implementation” (Kühl 1994: 66)

The eugenic measures had slightly different implications according to the socio-political profile of the European states. Still, the common denominator in the eugenic discourse across Europe was the intended amelioration of the societal corpus. Conceptually and methodologically the European eugenic school revealed two different orientations (or more precisely, two modus operandi) in the first half of the 20th century. The main objective, namely the improvement of societal parameters, remained mutual, although the approach was different. A clear distinction is made between the so called positive and negative eugenics:

“Positive eugenics focused on measures to encourage the more prolific reproduction of those with “good” heredity, while negative eugenics promoted policies to hinder the reproduction of those deemed hereditarily [unfit] or [inferior]” (Weikart 2009: 138).

The later development of eugenics demonstrated an increased convergence between science and ideology. The ideological degeneration of eugenics was accompanied by significant programmatic and conceptual changes. For example, the idea concerning the amelioration of society narrowed its connotation suggesting a more radical meaning: that of racial hygiene. The racial hygiene meaning for example, natality control, prevention of mixed marriages or crossbreeding etc. was put into practice in many European countries:

“Eugenicist and natalist themes recur repeatedly in fascist racial science and race laws, not just in Nazi Germany but also in Italy, Croatia, Romania and Hungary, reflecting an inter-European concern with racial expansion and racial hygiene” (Woodley 2010: 200).

The eugenic concepts and ideas were politically assumed and adapted to the ideological needs of each nation state. Radical social programs were made possible in many cases by invoking the infallibility of scientific evidences assumed by eugenics. In interwar Romania the complicity between ideology and science eventually took the form of radical legislation issued against some ideologically undesirable social categories. Likewise, the Romanian eugenic measures tried to redefine and reset the intra-societal relations by establishing new ethno-cultural boundaries and by promoting a new extensive vision concerning the future gender roles and gender identities.
Gender identity and ethnic exclusiveness in interwar Romania

Despite being placed in the same logic of trans-European eugenics, the Romanian case illustrates some distinct features and has to be therefore analyzed separately, according to the particular national context. The Romanian eugenic movement had a significant political and cultural impact in the first half of the 20th century. It highlighted the necessity of conceiving a coherent set of measures for modernizing the state and the society. This could be achieved by using a specially designed legislation projects combined with civic volunteerism (Bucur 2005: 28). Initially, the Romanian eugenic measures were issued for dealing with concrete social problematic aspects such as female analfabetism, disease prevention, hygiene education, infant mortality, mental diseases etc. The later synchronization with the Romanian homegrown nationalism determined a reorientation of eugenics towards ethnicity related issues: ,,Romanian eugenists, for instance, devoted much of their activities to the issue of ethnicity” (Turda, Weindling 2007: 13).

Among the exponents of the Romanian eugenic school were distinguished personalities most of them having a medical professional background. Much of their scientific work was released in the periodical “Buletin Eugenici şi Biopolitic” (Eugenics and Biopolitics Journal t.n.). Among the most prominent supporters of Romanian eugenic movement, the following are mentionable:

- Iuliu Moldovan (leader of the eugenics movement in Transylvania)
- Gheorghe Marinescu (renowned endocrinologist)
- Gheorghe Banu (leader of the eugenic movement at the Faculty of Medicine in Bucharest)
- Emil Racoviţă (speologist and President of the Romanian Academy)
- Dimitrie Gusti (one of the most important Romanian sociologists)
- Sabin Manuilă (demographer)
- Simion Mehedinți (geographer)

Institutionally the Romanian eugenic movement was well organized and financed. The financial resources were provided partially by the Romanian government and, in some cases, by foreign organizations such as the Rockefeller foundation (Butaru 2010: 202). Romania’s eugenic centers functioned in Cluj-Napoca and Sibiu. These facilities were institutionally supported and sponsored by Societatea României Regală de Eugenici (Romanian Royal Eugenics Society t.n.), Secţia de Eugenici a Institutului Social Român (Eugenic Departement of the Romanian Social Institute t.n.) and Secţia Biopolitică a Asociaţiei Transilvănene Astra/The Biopolitics Departement of the Transylvanian Astra Association [t.n.] (Bucur 2005: 26)

The interwar Romanian eugenic rhetoric systematically approached the issue of gender identity and gender bio-typology. It was believed that ameliorating the national bio-racial heritage primarily depends on the gender politics and strategies. The ideological instrumentalization of some eugenics related issues such as marriages, natality strategies, bio-racial education etc. was intended to
transform the so-called human capital of the state into a matter of national interest. Ensuring the (exclusive) racial perpetuation of the human capital automatically meant the future undisturbed and ethnically pure existence of the state organism. From this particular eugenic perspective the gender role becomes highly relevant. The eugenic discourse clearly specifies the social and biological role of the women:

„The social and political value of women exist as long as they can have reliable descendants. This aspect automatically belongs to the field of state policies on birth control” [t.n] (Panu in Neagoe 2012: 93).

The Romanian eugenics constructed the women’s identity primarily by highlighting their importance in the process of reproduction. Women were ideologically asked to serve the national interest by giving birth to the future human capital of the state. The request to give birth in the name of the state was not a randomly carried out eugenic measure. Not all women were eugenically entitled to give birth. Some of them considered ethno-culturally undesirable were rather discouraged to procreate. The eugenic program regarding natalist politics was clearly defined and targeted, meaning that allogenic or dysgenic elements had to be reproductively isolated. Simultaneously, the individuals having an ideologically desirable hereditary profile had to be encouraged (if not obligated) to reproduce:

„An express eugenic measure is intended to stimulate by all means the birthrate in case of superior social elements and to discourage or even suppress the natural growth of dysgenic elements” (Manuilă 1941: 1).

The Romanian eugenic discourse highlighted the fact that the social role of women primarily refers to their potential as mothers. The future of the state organism depends on the procreative role assumed by women and on their ability to internalize the ideologically legitimated right to serve their extended community i.e. the nation (Stanca 1940: 65). Without the women’s assumed commitment the national project can not be optimally and authentically fulfilled. Consequently, their eugenic education becomes a strategic national imperative.

The women identity was eugenically defined by emphasizing two main dimensions. There was a clear dichotomy between the social and biological role of adult females. Biologically they had to play an active role (procreation), while socially their attributed position was passive. The Romanian eugenists underlined the importance of reproduction among individuals having a superior biological profile. For instance, the intellectuals had to be encouraged to procreate regardless of their personal options. In this respect a proper legislation had to be issued by the authorities, in order to discourage the celibate and the so called sterile marriages (Manuilă 1941: 3).

In the particular context of eugenic gender identity construction not only the economic or social determinism played a decisive role but also the biological one. Discussions about the causes of social structural problems and ethic decadence (for example prostitution) ended in many cases with clearly formulated conclusions: the biological heritage determines the social and moral behavior.
In an article called “Considerații generale asupra cauzelor prostituției” (General observations concerning the causes of prostitution t.n.), published in „Buletin Eugenic și Biopolitic” (Vol. 4, Nr. 1-2, January – February 1930), Ovidiu Comșia, considered a central figure of the Romanian eugenic school, made the following description about the generic look of a prostitute:

„Anthropological deviations of the skull and face, identifiable in this group of women, actually mean a decrease of the head size and implicitly, a decrease of the skull and brain mass. This would be the explanation for the diminished intellect and sense of ethics” (Comșia 1930: 48).

Claiming its scientific potential the Romanian eugenics developed a veritable taxonomy of female types and characters. In opposition to the negative biological and moral type (as described above), a new idealized female character emerged and rapidly occupied a central position in the eugenic rhetoric. The physical, moral or psycho-somatic qualities of these women were superlatively presented:

“Somatically, she is medium sized and has quite full shapes without disturbing the harmony of the whole body. The pelvis, wider than shoulders, provides a comfortable place for the future fetus. Likewise, the preeminence of the breasts guarantees an absolute abundance of food for the born infants. Her smooth skin has almost no peripheral hair-growth, while her scalp hair maintains a permanent wealth. Her passions are usually discreet, her feelings stable and her intimate life less varied and less intense. Placed by destiny in the service of perpetuating life, her desires and aspirations don’t exceed her duties as wife and mother” (Comșia 1936: 33).

Eugenically, the women were presented not only as desirable or undesirable typologies but also in correlation to the men. For the Romanian eugenists the social role of men and women was differentially perceived. In an article called “Rostul biologic al femeii” (The biological purpose of women n.t.) dr. Constantin Stanca, a renowned Romanian eugenic scientist, argued that for the men, the family life simply represents a social necessity, while for women it represents a physiological necessity (Stanca 1940: 53). This particular perspective underlining the necessary familial self-fulfillment of women is highly instrumental. At this argumentative level, the eugenic discourse becomes almost propagandistic. In order to defend the idea of a pure ethno-cultural nation state, the Romanian eugenists developed a mixture of scientific and ideological rhetoric. Never before was the women identity in the Romanian society that artificially and narrowly described.

In the interwar period, the Romanian woman not only had to be a good mother and wife, contributing therefore to the future sanity of the nation, she also had to defend the national interest by avoiding mixed marriages and implicitly having children with non-Romanians. The idea of differentiated reproduction had a strategic importance for the eugenic discourse because it comprised the defining elements of ethnic exclusiveness. According to this highly ideologized perspective, a new legislation had to be issued in order to prohibit interethnic marriages and to reconfigure the long-term marital
preferences of all Romanian women. Such a legislative project was proposed by one of the most notorious exponents of the Romanian eugenic school: Dr. Petru Râmneanţu.

Râmneanţu proposed some restrictive measures, for discouraging mixed marriages. Most of them were supposed to have a compulsory character without any exception. Some referred to the mandatory marriage of all Romanian state officials only to ethnic Romanian women (Râmneanţu 1937: 336). Others restricted the access of children born in multiethnic families, to non-Romanian schools (Râmneanţu: 1937: 336). The eugenists believed that an ethnocentric educational system would represent a decisive precondition for establishing a veritable sense of Romanianhood. Râmneanţu's eugenic vision includes easily identifiable elements of racial hygiene and programmatic, highly ideologized biopolitical assertions. The state, as supreme legitimate authority, is entitled to conduct the necessary population politics in order to ameliorate the societal conditions and implicitly to ensure its future existence:

„Public policies represent the actions carried out by public authorities, usually the state, to protect national interests in the field of population” (Râmneanţu 1940: 29).

The construction of national identity in interwar Romania reveals a complex discursive and conceptual framework based both on ideological and scientifically defined elements. By fostering the idea of ethnic exclusiveness the Romanian eugenists tried to define a new sense of community and to make the systematic state interventionism at the level of social corpus, a widely accepted and legitimate measure.

Conclusions

The subject of eugenics is a relatively new historiographical preoccupation especially in the field of gender studies. In Romania, this scientifically claimed movement had a rapid and intense development in the interwar period. Despite being in some degree influenced by external factors (i.e. the geopolitical configuration of Europe, the rise of radical political ideologies and the various manifestations of eugenics worldwide), the Romanian eugenics basically represents a home-grown phenomenon determined and shaped by the internal socio-political conditions. Emerged as a necessary activity in the field of social activism (especially sanitary education and social care) this movement soon became ideologically instrumentalized. The political stakeholders of that time recognized the considerable potential of eugenics to provide a much needed justification for some unprecedented radical social policies. In this respect the eugenics served as an ideological forerunner for the intended construction of the so-called ethnocratic state (as described in the first section of this paper).

In the process of establishing an ethnically defined national identity, a key-role was played by the gender-connected concepts and ideas. The bio-typology of women, their social and reproductive role or the problem of mixed marriages,
represented major themes in the eugenic ideologized discourse. The Romanian eugenists tried to explain many societal problems (i.e. mental diseases, prostitution or even the predisposition for crime) by emphasizing bio-racial profile of individuals. Another core idea of the Romanian eugenic school was differentiate reproduction. All Romanian women were supposed to choose their future partners according to the existing bio-racial legislation because the national interest was considered more important than personal life. Likewise, the women were assiduously encouraged to fulfill their potential as mothers. Renowned, Romanian eugenists complained about the so-called sterile marriages (families without children) and harshly condemned the women who chose not to have children (Stanca 1940 : 55).

The relevance of eugenics for the Romanian history in the first half of 20th century is nowadays slightly undermined. Therefore an extensive investigation of this controversial phenomenon by using an interdisciplinary approach will certainly facilitate a more appropriate understanding of the Romanian interwar socio-political context.

References


