Book Reviews


Investigating the history of eugenics in early twentieth-century Hungary bears great significance for multiple disciplines. Scholars seeking to understand the intellectual history of Hungary in the early decades of the 1900s, the significance and contribution of Hungarian thinkers to scientific, social, and political discourses in an international context can find a wealth of previously unexamined material when they explore the debates on eugenics in early twentieth century Hungary. Perhaps more significantly, addressing the issues of the variations of the eugenic discourse that were prevalent a hundred years ago can help us to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the highly complex, contested, and ideologically charged notions of nation, race, and health — concepts that still are the focal points of heated socio-political debates in twenty-first century Hungary. Anyone wishing to examine the intellectual-political dynamics with respect to health, race and nation should turn to Marius Turda’s monograph, *Eugenics and Nation in Early 20th Century Hungary,* since it is a thoroughly researched, thought-provoking and highly illuminating study.

Although Turda’s book is a significant addition to the social, political, and intellectual history of Hungary, those who are more specifically interested in the (international) history of eugenics will find *Eugenics and Nation* a crucial contribution, as well. The international development and various national adaptations of eugenics have mostly been studied in Western countries, such as Britain, Germany or the United States. However, in a community where a struggle for national sovereignty and political independence from colonial powers has been a dominant cultural narrative, the significance and stakes of defining “race,” “nation” and “national
progress” are quite different than in those countries that have been the dominant forces in world politics and history.

The aim of Turda’s book is to explore how the “vision of social and biological improvement associated with eugenics became central to various programs of social reform and national progress” (1) in early twentieth-century Hungary, and to examine how Hungarian intellectuals debating eugenics interacted with the international scholarly community in this period. As a result, Turda’s methodology draws on “comparative and intellectual history as well as [on] the history of science and the social history of medicine” (6). Turda traces the development of a Hungarian approach and later on a specific national adaptation of eugenic thought from the beginning of the twentieth century to the aftermath of the First World War. The various chapters helpfully contextualize the specific issues on a national and international level. On the one hand, this helps the readers to see the importance of Hungarian eugenics in an international ideological landscape. By locating debates on eugenics in a specific cultural and historical framework, Turda shows in what ways eugenics was important in furthering an agenda of the political and social improvement of the nation. Turda analyses numerous articles published in journals such as Huszadik Század, Athenaeum, Egészség, Fajegészségügy, A Társadalmi Muzeum Értesítője and Magyar Társadalomtudományi Szemle and public debates and lectures delivered at conferences in great detail, and shows the diverse nature of eugenic thought in Hungary.

Apart from unearthing a facet of Hungarian intellectual and political history “which historians have repeatedly edited out of Hungary’s national past” (6), Turda’s book also makes many relevant and significant theoretical points. One of the most crucial contributions of the monograph is that it shows the process and repercussions of equating the notions of “race” and “nation,” of intermingling biology and science with politics and nationalism. Turda shows how eugenics facilitated a process whereby “intellectual and political change was [...] recast by means of social and biological diagnosis” (18) and that “as a result, the nation’s body politic was eugenically choreographed, thereby prompting another phenomenon: the biologization of national belonging” (8). The legacy of such discourses is prevalent in contemporary political discourse on a Hungarian and international level as well, thus Turda’s study provides an important historical context to the understanding of current bio-political projects as well.

Since Turda’s book maps out the history of Hungarian debates on eugenics in the early decades of the 1900s in a nuanced and extremely de-
tailed manner, it not only serves as a thorough study and introduction to a specific facet of Hungarian intellectual, scientific, and political history, but it is a highly useful resource for initiating further research on pertaining topics. There are many exciting issues and questions, such as the interaction of eugenic discourses and women’s movements, which could not be elaborated on due to the scope of the study, even if they deserve further investigation. Although many tenets of eugenics seem incompatible with feminist ideas, such as emphasizing women’s reproductive duties, in actuality eugenics offered a potential space of social and political participation for women, in addition to assigning a new ground for citizenship by emphasizing women’s responsibilities as “the mothers of the nation.” As Turda’s book highlights, eugenics indeed intersected with the preliminary phases of feminism in Hungary. Turda details eugenic ideas by thinkers of the women’s movement, foregrounding that in the context of birth-control activism, which was an important facet of eugenic practice, “feminists like Rosika Schwimmer or Vilma Glücklich connected education and limitation of fertility with women’s social and economic emancipation” (100).

Contextualizing eugenics within the framework of Neo-Malthusian ideas, Turda also points out that Hungarian feminists who engaged with the ideas of eugenics were revered internationally. Thus, addressing the intersection of women’s movements and eugenics within a Hungarian or Central European context would be a valuable contribution to the history of not only eugenics, but feminism as well.

Moreover, it would be worth examining how the discourse of eugenics constructs the notion of disability as a hindrance to the progress of the whole race. Turda quotes the following passage on African child-rearing practices by Emil Torday, a Hungarian ethnologist and collector for the British Museum:

When the infant is born, it is examined carefully; if it is weak or deformed, then in one way or another, it is no longer allowed to burden its own life nor handicap its race in the struggle for survival. This is the reason why one sees no cripples or other kind of defective persons in Central or West Africa; this is the reason why man there is a man, virile in habit, strong and lithe in body. (qtd. in Turda 98; first emphasis mine)

This brief excerpt highlights the importance of the interaction between the individual body and the body politic, and explicitly construes embodied difference as a liability for the whole nation. The construction of anomalous embodiment and monstrosity as an obstacle to national progress has a long history, and the examination of such discourses in a Central Euro-
pean context with a view on eugenics would definitely be an exciting area of research.

Another possible topic offered by Turda’s work is the investigation of how ideas of eugenics were interpreted and put into practice on religious grounds, and how eugenics was aligned with metaphysical discourses and logic in general. Revealingly, the “founding father” of eugenics, Francis Galton proposed that after eugenics is explored as an academic question and accepted as a viable practice, “it must be introduced into the national conscience, like a new religion” (qtd. in Turda 6). Not only was eugenics overtly positioned as a “new religion” from the outset, eugenic ideas seemed to resonate with religious practitioners. For instance, the Bishop of Székesfehérvár, Ottokár Prohászka “located the regenerative potential of eugenics within Christian morality and used it to reinforce the importance of instruction and schooling in the formation of a strong national community” (90). Although there is no space in Turda’s monograph to devote chapter-length analyses of religious discourses, addressing the relationship of eugenics and religious morality could lead to illuminating insights in future research — especially in Hungary, which has been constructed as a country dedicated to the Virgin Mary by the dominant national narratives. Another prevalent Hungarian cultural narrative is the vision of “the death of the nation” (nemzethalál-vízió) — it would be exciting to explore how this dominant cultural anxiety interacted with a founding fear of eugenics (regardless of nationality), the anxiety about biological and national degeneration.

As such, apart from being a comprehensively researched and highly insightful study of the development of eugenics in Hungary, the wealth of material also makes Turda’s monograph an extremely useful and thought-provoking ground for future investigations. Turda draws on a great number of resources, and the book’s useful and instructive index serves as a great help in trying to locate the many contributors to the debates on eugenics in the various parts of the study. The monograph’s accessible language makes sure that Eugenics and Nation is enjoyable not only for scholars but also for those who are not engaged in academic study but would like to know more about the history of eugenics or the intellectual landscape of Hungary at the beginning of the twentieth century.

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I write this review on the basis of better late than never. Baer’s monograph seems to have had little exposure in Hungarian scholarly circles — which is unfortunate. Hopefully this book-review will help to ameliorate somewhat that situation. The book at hand deals with an important subject: the reaction of one of Hungary’s churches to the attempt by the Communists who ruled the country from 1948 to 1989 to eliminate them or to make them instruments of the totalitarian state for the control of Hungarian society.

Hungary’s churches had a taste as to what can happen when Communists take power: during the commune in Hungary in the summer of 1919 the ruling Communists unleashed a reign of terror on the churches and religious life and would have no doubt caused them irreparable damage had their experiment with leftist politics not come to an end after a few months. After this episode of torment for the country’s faithful, organized religious life rebounded and the following two decades saw a golden age for Hungary’s churches.

Highly supportive of the churches in these decades was the regime of Admiral Miklós Horthy. His rule has often been portrayed as “fascist” by polemicians and even some historians. Baer considers this depiction of the Horthy regime “inaccurate”, he admits however that it could be called “oddly authoritarian” (p. 10). Under Horthy, the churches “flourished”. In the “political and civil spheres” they had more influence than they had before 1914. The “accepted” churches, including the Lutheran Church, received state subsidies. Together with the Roman Catholics and the Calvinists they operated about two-thirds of the country’s elementary schools and three-quarters of its teacher-training institutions. The Lutherans had four dioceses headed by bishops — two of whom, Zoltán Túróczy and Lajos Ordass, would play large roles in the story Baer tells.

Although Hungary was occupied by the Red Army in 1945, it wasn’t till 1948 that the country’s churches were subjected to the full force of communist repression. The greatest crisis was caused by the government’s decision to nationalize parochial schools. Bishop Túróczy came to
the conclusion that the Church had to yield to the state’s wishes in this matter, while Ordass refused to consent to the idea. Despite fierce resistance to the plan, mainly by the Roman Catholic Church, the law to nationalize the country’s parochial schools was passed by Hungary’s communist-dominated Parliament. Unlike Cardinal Mindszenty of the R.C. Church, Bishop Ordass organised no resistance to the process of school nationalization. Still, the authorities decided to remove him from office and, after a while, succeeded in arresting him and convicting him on charges that he violated some obscure rules for the handling of diocesan finances. Compromising with the regime in the manner of Bishop Túróczy, and resisting its anti-church measures in the fashion of Bishop Ordass, would remain the two often contradictory approaches Hungary’s Lutheran Church would use in the following four decades of communist rule. The advocates of both lines used theological as well as historical arguments to support their position, arguments that Baer outlines and analyzes in great detail. Both strategies were designed to ensure the Church’s long-term survival. Later, other approaches surfaced, including the idea that in its struggle against the atheist assault, the Church might have to undergo martyrdom.

In the Rákosi era of Hungarian history (1948-56) not only the personnel of the Church’s elite changed but the role of the leading clergy was transformed also. Church leaders were no longer accountable to their flock but to the authorities who put them into their positions. Often they functioned as propagandists for the Communists and they also developed what Baer calls “a new theology of socialism” (p. 45). In the process theological arguments were invented for the justification of totalitarian socialism. This process took Túróczy and his colleagues’ non-resistance to communist anti-church measures, to their successors’ complete cooperation with the regime. This was collaborationism at its worse.

Opposition to this state of affairs within the Church was slow to gather momentum but by the early fall of 1956 it had become substantial. Almost as an unrelated development, Bishop Ordass was rehabilitated of his “crimes” and was to start teaching at Hungary’s Lutheran seminary on the 24th of October, but by then events in the country had overtaken these developments. A revolution broke out in Budapest on the 23rd. As a consequence and a result of the resignation of two other bishops, Ordass became the senior bishop of his Church. Interestingly, the restoration to power by the Communists did not lead to Ordass’s immediate removal from office. By year’s end, however, relations between Ordass and his political superi-
Ordass’s successor became Zoltán Káldy. Baer describes him as “an ambiguous, partly tragic figure.” Some people saw in him a collaborator, others a “pragmatic defender of the church.” In Baer’s view, he was responsible for inflicting “countless and unnecessary psychic wounds” on members of his flock, both pastors and parishioners (p. 93). In the mid-1960s he advanced his theology of diaconia, the church in the service of the socialist society, which became the Church’s official theology especially after 1967 when Káldy assumed the position of his country’s senior Lutheran bishop (p. 97). In the following decade, Káldy became the pre-eminent figure of Hungarian Lutheranism. An acknowledgement of his stature was his election in 1984 as president of the Lutheran World Federation. Rather than using his new-found international prestige to enhance the position of his Church, Baer tells us that Káldy spent his time trying to settle scores with priests who had crossed him in the past. By this time Káldy “was a lost man, preoccupied only with his own prestige…” (p. 109). Late in 1985 he suffered a stroke and died two years later. Baer’s overall assessment of Káldy and his theology of diaconia is unflattering. The theology, in Baer’s words, was “originally only a theological excuse for compromising with the regime,” but it later “became… one more way of… legitimating socialism,” and Káldy, despite his good intentions, “became a mere player in the communist game…” (p. 122).

After the 1989 events that saw the transition in Hungary from totalitarian rule to multi-party democracy, the leadership of the Lutheran Church granted “moral satisfaction” to all those in the Church who “suffered unjustly” because of wrongs committed against them by the Church. Many members argued that such a facile apology “did not confront the past but glassed it over” (p. 124). In the meantime other developments resulted in the return of the Church to its pre-1948 position in Hungarian society. Important among these processes was the re-opening of some of the schools that had been nationalised by the Communists. A group within the Church called for new elections for all church offices but action on this demand was stalled — and acrimony regarding the Church’s transition continued. The path to a free church in a free society was burdened by the legacy of four decades of oppression. This era of repression has been compared to the “Babylonian captivity” of the Jews in Biblical times. Baer points out that when that captivity ended, the Jews could march back to Jerusalem — but when the Lutherans of Hungary became free of com-
munist rule, they had no Jerusalem to return to but had to embark on a journey through the desert on a path leading to an uncertain future.

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Books received


