Critics, Commentators and Opponents of Eugenics
1880s–1950s

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Abstract
How the rise of eugenics was subjected to constant criticisms, which shaped and adapted the concerns of eugenicists in Central Europe, is assessed in this paper. Initially, the criticisms took the form of journal articles and books by individual authors like the social scientist Friedrich Hertz and the anatomist Oscar Hertwig. Although there were clear differences between pronatalists (seeking to maintain the birth rate) and eugenicists, the criticisms remained at an individual level – essentially as contributions to a public discourse. However, there arose a concerted international attempt to counter racialised forms of eugenics in response to National Socialism, when the critics formed organisations across Europe. Here we see the Central European critique shaping a wider resistance to biologically based racial programmes.

Keywords
eugenics, racial hygiene, Darwinism, critics of eugenics, Alfred Ploetz, Friedrich Hertz, Ignaz Zollschan, concept of race, genocide

Central Europe in the first half of the twentieth century was not only a cauldron of simmering inter-ethnic tension but it was also an arena for critical discussions of eugenics. These discussions were part of a process of reception of various models of eugenic methods, as advocated by British, French and German scientists and biologically minded social reformers – a process that was less one of direct transfer but more of adaptation of cultural and socio-political specificities. How the rise of eugenics was subjected to constant criticisms, which shaped and adapted the concerns of eugenicists, merits fuller historical scrutiny. Initially, the criticisms took the form of journal articles and books by individual authors. Although there were clear differences between pro-natalists (seeking to maintain the birth rate) and eugenicists, the criticisms remained at an individual level – essentially as contributions to a public discourse.
However, there arose a concerted international attempt to counter racialised forms of eugenics in response to National Socialism, when the critics formed organisations across Europe. Here we see the Central European critique shaping a wider resistance to biologically based racial programmes. Although some of these criticisms have been noted, there is no historical overview of the lines of critical thinking.

Eugenics developed as a synthesis between the British ideas of the statistician Francis Galton of a “national eugenics”, French ideas of pro-natalist “puericulture”, and German biology, experimentally based medicine, and positivistic social thought. Galton’s ideas of eugenics were mediated by the Eugenics Review and the International Eugenics Congress of 1912 (Turda 1910, 36). Turning to the German influence on Central Europe, the founder of “racial hygiene” (a term first used in 1895), the physician Alfred Ploetz, was both an advocate of racial hygiene on a “Greater German” basis while in continued discussion with critics of his views. Ploetz was born in what was then the Prussian city of Breslau (today Wrocław) in 1860, and always retained a sense of needing to defend German racial identity. He operated at two levels, one scientific and international to develop a new science concerning ideas of the hereditary transmission of human attributes of physique and culture, and another – generally covertly expressed in personal communications or as part of a secret Nordic nucleus within the wider society – that was committed to Germanic and Nordic racial values (Weindling 1989). At the same time there was an influential model of “social hygiene” based on fertility control and advocated by the German physician and social scientist, Alfred Grotjahn. A third strand, derived from French ideas of pro-natalism and “puericulture”, was more environmentally oriented. Central Europeans were faced with a choice of models (Turda and Weindling 2006; Turda 2010, 9, 32, 38).

There is an inherent tension in the history of Central European eugenics in the interwar period either as racially oriented, linking eugenics and the racial right, or as enmeshed with a broad political and ethnic spectrum, often – as elucidated by Marius Turda – from a modernist perspective. “Blood” as an ideology of social purity, and race have therefore been contested areas, with different meanings imputed. The eventual Nazi racial master plan has meant that the variety of central European eugenics and related medical research has been obscured. Moreover, eugenics cannot be seen as a prerogative of the ultra-right – and here a generation of research has elucidated socialist, Catholic and Jewish forms of eugenics. Even so, the critics of eugenics have barely been recognised.