Explicit and Disguised Eugenics:
A Premise

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Eugenics, as a science aiming at the biological improvement of the human species (as it was defined by Galton 1883: Cassata 2006, 1), has been the subject of a half century long debate in historical literature. Research has focused at first on British, American, German and Scandinavian experiences, to shift then to cover other areas of Europe and the world (Kevles 1985; Bashford, Levine 2010; Turda 2010; Gillette, Turda 2014). This brought to discover that the articulation between the scientific positions and the political measures proposed by eugenicists may vary broadly, not only following «multiple national styles» (Cassata 2011, 2), but also inside of them and at transnational level. As a consequence, eugenics has been described as a «multiform archipelago» (Weingart 1999) rather than a coherent scientific movement.

Yet there was not only variation, but also a transformation of eugenics along modern times. The origin of the new discipline are deeply rooted in the positivist milieu and in the intertwining of medicine and psychiatry with demography and statistics. Theodore Porter (2016) argues that a science of human heredity found its empirical origins in the early nineteenth century recording practices of insane asylums, supporting an interpretation of mental illness as a result of biological heredity. At the same time, the emergence of anthropometry was directly connected to the statistical definition of 'normal' as opposed to 'deviant' or 'pathological', whilst the research on individual features for purposes of identification, control and social intervention went hand in hand with the development of vital statistics (Schweber 2006). Debates on the physical, biological or racial characteristics of human beings were also crucial part of the later autonomous development of population studies, which displayed a strong connection with social medicine. As the readers of this journal know well, the first course in demography was taught in 1876 at the École d'Anthropologie de Paris that was part of the Faculty of Medicine, and the series of International Congresses of Demography, opened in Paris in 1878, was soon merged with that of hygiene in 1882.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the convergence between a growing focus on heredity and an interventionist ideology allowed eugenics, as other sciences that emerged in the same time span, to couple a strong political significance and a relatively high level of formalization. The link between physical and racial attributes or social class behaviours became at the end of the nineteenth century the privileged object of study for British mathematicians and statisticians. Francis

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Galton and Karl Pearson (Porter 2004) fully established eugenics as a science through the introduction of universal mathematical tools, the correlation and the regression, which were specifically designed to measure the relationship between the physical and intellectual characteristics of living beings and humans in particular (Mazumdar 1992). During the first decade of the twentieth century, scientific journals specialized in eugenics multiplied, national societies (or special committees) of eugenics were established. In 1912 the first International Congress of Eugenics was held in London, and the second followed in New York in 1921.

The interwar years were the golden age of eugenics, but this was also the period when its features varied more depending on the context. The adopted political measures extended from the application of hygiene to maternity and child care to 'preventive' measures as forced sterilization, up to 'repressive' interventions for the isolation and elimination of the individual carriers of undesirable traits, usually mixing together different approaches. Theoretical positions were even more differentiated: the reference to the Mendelian paradigm rather than to neo-Lamarckian interpretations of heredity were not necessarily corresponding directly to a preference for 'negative' measures rather than for 'positive' interventions.

Kevles (1985) has distinguished eugenicists in three broad groups, mostly making reference to the evolution of scientific and public debate in the United States. «Mainline eugenicists» held conservative political views, and coupled their claims for coercive interventions to protect the breeding with strong racial, class and gender prejudices. «Reform eugenics» since the 1930s discarded such an attitude as non scientific and attached a social progressive meaning to eugenic interventions, focusing on the use of the knowledge of heredity laws for the amelioration of mankind as a whole and justifying coercive practices with the higher interest of the collectivity. Finally, a «new eugenics» that emerged after the Second World War was making use of genetics to suggest prophylactic monitoring and medical measures through expert authority, avoiding direct State coercion on individual family choices (Hampton 2005). The three typologies coexisted in time, as racial prejudice remained widespread for long in part of the eugenic milieu. An explicit refusal of surreptitious coercive practices emerged with the revolts of the 1960s for civil rights and against the Vietnam War.

If such a chronology holds for the United States, it is rather difficult to imagine a perfect timing coincidence, despite of the widespread circulation of eugenic ideas, in countries such as the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany or Fascist Italy. As far as Italy is concerned, the body of historical studies produced since the 1980s has been reviewed by Cassata (2006, 12-18), showing the role of social medicine and positivist sociobiology in preparing the ground for the spread of eugenics, which found in scholars connected with the Lombrosian criminal anthropology its main enthusiasts. The debate has then focused on the peculiar characteristics of Italian 'Latin' eugenics, on its connections with fascism and on the continuity or discontinuity with the racist turn of the late 1930s. In his book, Cassata took position by disentangling the historical versions of the multiform and peculiar Italian eugenic movement from the proper racist positions emerging in the late 1930s and from anti-

semitism. His documented analysis proves the divergence between the biological racism that inspired 1938 racial laws, and mainstream Italian eugenics, which made reference to a neo-Lamarckian interpretation of heredity, favoured the maintenance of traditional reproductive habits and had a notion of race based on national identity. Such a distinction does not conceal the responsibilities of Italian eugenics in spreading presumed scientific arguments against miscegenation and against Jews, who were identified as strangers. Yet a better understanding of the complexity of interwar eugenic positions helps to explain the presence of surprising postwar continuities in Italian eugenics, identifying their origin in the connections with American racism and in the support of Catholic institutions to Latin eugenics (Cassata 2010).

The articles collected in this special section of «Popolazione e storia» take stock of the results of previous inquiries in order to explore more in depth new research directions.

The first two articles focus on the main promoters of the establishment of the Italian Committee for Eugenic Studies in 1913 (Comitato Italiano per gli Studi di Eugenica), an event reconstructed in detail by Luca Tedesco in this volume. Both Giuseppe Sergi (1841-1936) and Alfredo Niceforo (1876-1960) were influenced by Cesare Lombroso and his views concerning the necessity to prevent degeneration by monitoring and managing the population. His peculiar concept of degeneration as the result of natural variation had also a role in making his pupils more prudent with regard of sterilization and other 'negative' measures (Cassata 2011, 117-118). Both Sergi and Niceforo were also present at the first Eugenic Congress in London in 1912, together with Enrico Morselli, Corrado Gini and other Italian scholars. Sergi was certainly among them the most aware of the scientific developments of British eugenics, as he was acquainted with Francis Galton (Sergi 1911). He was also an out-most critic of humanitarian interventions in defence of the weak degenerates, which contrasted the effect of natural selection, and a consequent supporter of their «elimination». However, on the basis of a textual comparison of his publications, Tedesco suggests as the most likely hypothesis that by this term Sergi actually meant temporary segregative measures preventing reproduction. His attention to the sensitiveness of public opinion to coercive measures as sterilization pushed him to discard this as a viable solution.

Angelo Matteo Caglioti focuses instead on the scientific biography of the demographer Alfredo Niceforo, which he reconstructs using his letters and his file at the Minsistry of Public education. Caglioti follows the evolution of his eugenic project of «social scientific observation» from Lombrosian criminal anthropology and field measurement of skulls to an effective use of statistical data. A pupil of Sergi and of the socialist collaborator of Lombroso, Enrico Ferri, Niceforo learned statistics while working from 1910 to 1913 inside the central statistical office that had produced the same figures he had used to argue the existence of two races in Italy (Niceforo 1898; 1901)[1]. While at the statistical office, as an enthusiast of eugenics Niceforo proposed the collection of data on the academic performance and family background of Italian students, in order to study the hereditary charac-

ter of intelligence. After the First World War Niceforo became a university professor of Statistics, and in 1938 presented at the International Congress of Population in Paris a visual statistical method based on 'graphic profiles' to measure the normality of an individual. Yet the selection biases implicit in the elaboration of data undermined the purported objectivity of this method, as demonstrated by Corrado Gini, at the time not only the leading Italian statisticians, but also the most renown Italian eugenicist. Caglioti argues that this episode highlights the attempt of some Italian eugenicists to use statistics to provide scientific foundations to their claims, and the emergence of deep scientific conflicts among them.

A naïve confidence in the objectivity of statistical elaborations was one of the characteristics of what Kevles (1985) has defined «mainline eugenics», and one of the reasons for his demise by «reform eugenicists» in sought of scientific legitimation by means of a more rigorous approach to the study of heredity. Yet in the Italian case the latter position was also identified with arguments against democracy, which was considered as a threat to the interests of future generations (Gini 1937).

The practice of the statistical measurement of the characteristics attributed to heredity was then crucial to a large part of Italian eugenics. Manfredi Alberti proposes here an analysis on the surveys realised and published under fascism on asylum patients as a way to assess the role of quantification practices in the construction of a scientific argument in favour of eugenic measures, focusing on psychiatry as one of the disciplines that most resorted to hereditary explanations in that period. Institutional conflicts, budget constraints and scientific rivalry conjured in making the continuation of the survey impossible, showing how historical contingencies may affect the development of such an hybrid discipline as eugenics was.

As Roser Cussò (2012) has demonstrated in a previous study, quantification was crucial since the interwar period as a tool for the legitimation not only of scientific enterprise, but also of international organisations. In the article here published, she questions the presumed 'silent abstinence' of the League of Nations from any involvement in eugenic programs. Cussò resorts to different levels of analysis, going from the study of the publications cited and used by the Health Offices of the League to the analysis of personal and official correspondence, up to the archival reconstruction of training exchanges of medical personnel between the League and national eugenic institutions. The microanalysis of the working mechanisms of an international organisation allows Cussò to push forward our understanding of the influence exerted by the common cultural frames of diplomatic, scientific and technical élites. The idea of the superior interest of science and human society made possible the surreptitious adoption of an eugenic approach to the organisation of the Health Office in the same way as it pushed the League to neglect the claims of minorities against major nationalistic pressures (Cussò 2013).

This last article shifts the focus from Italy to the transnational level. Yet unexpected similarities emerge, in particular concerning the problem of the 'disguised' nature of eugenics both in Italy and inside the League of Nations. As Caglioti has shown, the hybrid and multidisciplinary nature of Italian eugenics, together with its

scarce scientific legitimation, created the conditions for its ubiquitous presence in scientific texts during the interwar period. In the same way, the official silence of the League of Nations about eugenics concealed the strong interest of the League officers for its applications, which lead to its implicit inclusion in the definition of health adopted by the World Health Organisation. The point is that such connections remain invisible if the historian limits her research to institutional centralised archives: the widespread nature of the phenomenon requires her to triangulate different sources and reading them against the grain, paying an equal attention to what they say and what they are silent about (Decker 2013).

[1] As Silvana Patriarca (1996, 233-240) has suggested, Niceforo's statistical argument was made possible by the peculiar geographical classifications that the Italian statistical office adopted after the unification of the country.

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