

Latin and Nordic Eugenics in the Project of Racial Improvement Set Up by Giuseppe Sergi, Founder of the Comitato italiano per gli studi di Eugenetica*

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Giuseppe Sergi was one of the greatest exponents of physical and evolutionist anthropology in Italy at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. He was also rightly regarded as a champion of the positive eugenics, characteristic of the Latin countries, that aimed to identify the biological and environmental factors that could be utilised socially to prevent degenerative pathologies and thus favour the reproduction and perfecting of desirable individuals. But Sergi's proposals concerning degenerative processes that were taking place have not been sufficiently examined in scientific literature about eugenics. These proposals underwent a significant evolution from Sergi's book *Le degenerazioni umane* (*Human Degeneracies*) (1889) to articles published close to and during World War I. We have regarded this evolution as worthy of being studied in depth in this essay.

While Sergi did indeed call for the drastic measures of negative eugenics for degenerates in his treatise at the end of the 19th century, in the course of World War I (a pre-eminently dysgenic event) he became convinced of the impracticability of sterilisation, branded as immoral by public opinion. Thus despite his constant calls for the elimination of degenerates, it is possible to speculate that, for Sergi, segregation remained the only practicable measure of negative eugenics.

Introduction. Italian scientific literature has focused on the eugenics movement since the 1980s, acknowledging the prevailing trends that had already taken shape in international scientific output (see for example Pogliano 1984, 1999 and 2005; Israel, Nastasi 1998; Maiocchi 1999 and 2004; Padovan 1999; Mantovani 2004; Cassata 2006 and 2011; Ciceri 2009; Israel 2010). According to the latter, the issue of eugenics, understood at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries as a study of socially-controllable factors determining the rise and fall in the biological quality of generations to come (Galton 1883 and 1904)¹, manifested itself in Latin countries in the adoption of a scheme (in which preventive social medicine, welfare of mothers and infants and, more generally, health and hygiene programmes played a prominent part) that aimed at the creation of an environment favourable to the reproduction and perfecting of desirable individuals (Latin eugenics, positive or preventive; see the articles in Adams 1990 and the very recent Turda, Gillette 2014).

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In the Anglo-American, German and Scandinavian world, by contrast, the supporters of eugenics advocated the assumption of measures (such as sterilisation, abortion and segregation) that aimed to avoid the reproduction of 'undesirable' individuals. This was 'Nordic' eugenics or, according to the prevailing acceptance, negative eugenics (in this connection, see, for the British case, Mazumdar 1992; for the North American, Black 2003; for the German, Friedländer 1997; and for the Scandinavian, Broberg, Roll-Hansen 1996).

These two conceptions of eugenics had one element in common: the right and duty of the State to guide and manage reproductive processes. They were therefore different from the so-called liberal, new or consumer eugenics that emerged after World War II and refuted any legitimacy for public authorities to interfere in procreative choices: these should be left entirely to the individual (in this connection see Agar 2004).

As for the Italian case, some authors have put forward the hypothesis that the eugenics debate taking shape at the beginning of the last century was intended to be used under Fascism by the supporters of Nazi-inspired biological racism to support their radical proposals of negative eugenics (Padovan 1999, 453). But this was never put into effect by the Fascist regime; instead it embraced a pro-natal line of eugenics, being convinced that the strength of a nation and the racial betterment were closely linked to fertility increase (Quine 2012).

Italian research in the field of eugenics has begun to sketch an initial profile of the anthropologist Giuseppe Sergi. He was one of the founders of the eugenics movement in Italy, yet to date there is no complete scientific biography of him (for information on Sergi the eugenicist see Tedesco 2011 and 2012). After showing very early interest in philosophy and before becoming definitively engaged in physical and evolutionist anthropology, Giuseppe Sergi (Messina, 20 March 1841 - Rome, 17 October 1936) dedicated himself to studies of psychology, criminology and sociology. He helped to widen the knowledge of Herbert Spencer in Italy, editing the Italian version of the British philosopher's *The Study of Sociology* (1881a) and *The Data of Ethics* (1881b).

Sergi lectured at the University of Bologna from 1880 to 1884 and was Professor of Anthropology at the Faculty of Science in Rome from 1884 to 1916. From 1889 he was director of Italy's first laboratory of comparative and experimental psychology, attached to the Istituto di Antropologia (Institute of Anthropology) in Rome that was still run by him. In 1893 he founded the Società romana di Antropologia (Anthropological Society of Rome), transformed in 1937 into the Istituto italiano di Antropologia (Italian Institute of Anthropology). From this organisation emerged the Comitato italiano per gli studi di Eugenetica (Italian Committee of Eugenic Studies) in 1913. He was director of the «Atti» della Società romana di Antropologia (Society Proceedings), which became «Rivista di Antropologia» (Journal of Anthropology) in 1911 and «Journal of Anthropological Sciences» in 2004. He co-directed the «Rivista di Filosofia scientifica»² (Journal of Scientific Philosophy) – founded by Enrico Morselli, one of the greatest Italian experts in anthropological psychiatry – and the «Rivista Italiana di Sociologia» (Italian Journal

of Sociology) founded together with Guido Cavaglieri and Salvatore Cognetti De Martiis. He also founded and directed «Educazione e istruzione: rivista di pedagogia e scienze affini» (Education and Teaching: a Journal of Pedagogy and Related Sciences)³.

Sergi's prestige in the world of science was assured in 1914, when a committee was founded to honour him on the occasion of his 75th birthday; this committee then published a jubilee volume signed by Italian and foreign scholars (*Volume giubilare in onore di Giuseppe Sergi 1915-1916*). The committee included the palaeoethnologist Luigi Pigorini, director of the Museo preistorico ed etnografico (Prehistoric and Ethnographic Museum) of Rome; the anthropologist Vincenzo Giuffrida-Ruggeri, director of the Istituto di Antropologia (Institute of Anthropology) of the University of Naples and Sante De Sanctis, president of the Società romana di Antropologia.

Sergi was a scholar in a plurality of disciplines in the second half of the 19th century, a time when quite a few scientific specializations were becoming widespread (Bongiorno 1998, 111). He put these specialisations at the service of a rational refounding of a society whose psycho-physical integrity had to be safeguarded by means of a project of racial perfecting and the expunging of any metaphysical or religious element, which was just as threatening to society as the biological degeneration of the race.

Such perfecting in Sergi's opinion had to be pursued by means of physical and moral prophylaxis, preventive social medicine, the welfare of mothers and infants and education, these measures being appropriate for the prevention of degeneration. This approach was shared by Italy's political and medical class, who were inclined for the most part to agree with the 'environmentalist-neo-Lamarckian' model rather than the 'determinist-Mendelian' (Mantovani 2004, 32). But if Sergi believed that it was possible to prevent degeneration, he was nevertheless convinced that there was no remedy for the serious degenerative phenomena that were already taking place. So Sergi questioned the usefulness of the system of negative eugenics for incurable hereditary defects. On this point, his position underwent an evolution between the end of the 19th century and World War I. The purpose of this essay is to study this aspect of Sergi's thinking, since it has not previously been investigated in depth.

Inferior adaptation, artificial selection and the limits of education in Giuseppe Sergi. The category of 'degeneration' was brought into being as a diagnostic tool of psychiatry by the French alienist Benedict Augustin Morel (Huertas Garcia-Alejo 1987, Darmon 1989 and Sueur 1994). It moved from its original biomedical terrain to have an impact on sociology and psychology (Bonetta 1990, 37) and was transformed in Europe in the last 30 years of the 19th century «in the most effective representation of the true identity crisis that gripped European society» (Mantovani 2004, 15 and Pick 1993). This phenomenon is easily understood only if one pays attention to the extent to which that category turned out to be extraordinarily useful in accounting for the socially most unwelcome and dramatic outcomes and ten-

sions of socio-economic 19th century modernisation (Gervasoni 1997, 1090; Gilman, Chamberlin 1985; Leps, 1992).

Even in Italy a quick glance at the truly impressive number of writings that have been dedicated to this subject demonstrates very clearly that this theme of degeneration was really crucial in the cultural scene at the beginning of the last century (Rossi 1987, 63). Interest in this theme was also fed by concerns about maintaining the fledging unity of the nation. It is only in the light of such a preoccupation that one can understand the anguished questioning about the fate of Latin nations put by a Lombrosian sociologist such as Guglielmo Ferrero, author of *L'Europa giovane* (*The Young Europe*) (1897), and by Sergi himself, who severely chastised the conduct of the Italian ruling class in *La decadenza delle nazioni latine* (*The Decadence of the Latin Nations*) (1900) for dissipating the meagre resources of a State more recently formed than other Latin countries, such as Spain and France, in absurd colonial adventures. That was in fact what Italian governments did in the last 20 years of the 19th century: rather than «rebuilding the nation's forces, generating the strength to produce those riches in what a territory like Italy offered», they were «squandering those few national resources that were there with excessive spending that was supposed to give Italy the appearance of a great nation» (Sergi 1900, 118).

We can plant Sergi's investigation in this fertile cultural ground. He started off from the researches of Cesare Lombroso, as he himself had to acknowledge openly (Sergi 1908, 36). It was in fact Lombroso's researches that relaunched the studies of the potential links between crime and degeneration in the 1880s, not only in Italy but also in France and England (Darmon 1989, 34-37; Nye 1984⁴; Leps 1992). This followed the first expression of interest in the subject in English Spencerian circles in the 1860s (Nye 1985).

But at the end of the 19th century the theme of degeneration was widely discussed in other countries such as Spain and Portugal; it contributed to the success of the social hygiene movement and of disciplines such as sociology and criminology (Turda, Gillette 2014). In 1913 the Portuguese eugenicist António Mendes Correia became with his study *Os Criminosos Portugueses* (*Portuguese Criminals*) one of the first eugenicists in the Latin world to link eugenics with Cesare Lombroso's reflections on the biological origin of degeneration (Henriques 2012, 44-46).

But all the Italian eugenicists, from Enrico Morselli (1879) to the psychiatrist Augusto Tamburini (1875) and Paolo Mantegazza, holder of Italy's first anthropology professorship, were in agreement that degeneration had an organic base (Rossi 1987, 63-65 and Burgio 1999, 24). Yet this viewpoint encountered some opposition outside true eugenics circles. For example the statistician and sociologist Napoleone Colajanni criticised the Lombroso school itself, asserting that the causes of physical degeneration were of a socio-economic nature, not biological (Colajanni 1890).

Even the idea that 'regeneration' ought to be entrusted to artificial selection and thus placed side by side with Darwinian natural selection made its way through the various national eugenics schools of thought, including the Latin ones. Sergi was

not the only eugenicist to advocate the urgent need to promote artificial selection: others included the Romanian neurologist Gheorghe Marinescu (Turda, Gillette 2014) and the Spanish surgeon Enrique Diego Madrazo (Cleminson 2000, 82-83).

Lombroso may have taken the view that crime and deviancy had a biological origin, which the social environment helped to trigger or contain (Gervasoni 1997, 1101), but for Sergi the organic origins of various degenerative processes were still more convincing, as was revealed in 1889 by *Le degenerazioni umane* (Sergi 1889). This work has been aptly described as a substantial compendium of «the mentality, prejudices and fears of an era» (Pogliano 1999, 425). These degenerations, Sergi clarified, «are truly physical» and «for the most part cause disastrous harm to the vital functions; and intellectual and moral degenerations are the grave and fatal consequences of such harm, both for the individual who suffers them and for the entire social organism» (Sergi 1889)⁵. Sergian anthropology thus indicated that any «morphological degeneration» was a more or less serious «*sign or indication of functional degeneration*» (Sergi 1889, 27, in italics in the original).

The link between morphology and degeneration thus indicated a certain distance between Sergi and Lombroso in the identification of the necessary elements for recognising the presence or absence of a degenerative process. Although he shared the Lombrosian determinist and reductionist formulation, Sergi in fact considered that facial and cranial indicators revealed ethnic origin – not degenerative phenomena, as Lombroso believed. To identify the latter it would be essential to carry out a morphological, anatomical and physiological examination of the various organs.

Sergi dedicated a chapter in *Le degenerazioni umane* to each type of degeneration. Thus the reader was confronted with an array of case histories of sufferers from hereditary defects: the insane, suicides, criminals, prostitutes, parasites, slaves and menials, vagrants and beggars. All these subjects, the unhappy ‘residue’ of bourgeois society, are defined as «degenerates» in that «although they survive in the struggle for existence, they are weak and bear the signs, mostly obvious, of their weakness, both in their physical shape and in their behaviour» (Sergi 1889, 25).

Adaptation of degenerates to the social environment, runs Sergi’s theory, could not have happened «in normal conditions as used to happen for the strong, who are already suited to such conditions. Such adaptation must necessarily be in an inferior guise, since the condition of the weak is inferior» (Sergi 1889, 24). This «survival in inferior conditions» was precisely degeneration, a survival that allowed degenerates to reproduce themselves and thus pass on their pathologies (even those acquired during their lifetime) by heredity to their descendants.

There were various types of degenerates: those who presented «signs of subhuman or bestial atavism»; those with congenital morbid conditions, from heredity or from «vices» acquired at conception; those born healthy but damaged by disease or degenerative influences from the external environment or bad usage of vital functions (Sergi 1889, 26). Even the last-named were condemned, according to Sergi, to pass on their degenerative pathologies to their offspring.

«Inferior adaptation» was not presented by Sergi as an antithesis to the Darwinian theory of natural selection (see Volpone 2011 for Sergi’s reading of

Darwin)⁶ but as one of his ‘completions’ that accounted for the non-definitive extinction of the degenerates. (Inferior adaptation «is not a phenomenon that is absolutely contrary to the theory of selection»; it «does not [...] overturn the doctrine of selection»: Sergi 1889, 196-197).

As has been said, according to Sergi there is a close connection between physical and mental degeneration. Anaemia, malaria, cachexia and pellagra, for example, attack not only the physical body but «bring about mental degeneration» (Sergi 1889, 30)⁷.

Character, Sergi maintained, that is to say, that *modus operandi*, that «way of explaining individual activity on each occasion, in each event of a life in the social community» (Sergi 1889, 34) was in its organic base «an organism that depended on the physical organism; if all the character-forming elements were mental functions organised as ways of activity, if one of these functions was not normal because of a physical defect, whether the defect had come into being because of congenital morbid deterioration or arrested development *in utero* or later or because of illnesses during the individual’s life, then it naturally followed that this defect, large or small, must be present in the individual’s character» (Sergi 1889, 39-40).

More precisely, character was made up of two components: the fundamental and the adventitious. The first of these «derives from the slow depositing and continuous accumulation of elements that are formed in a succession of generations from whom the individual is descended; the adventitious is that which is added during the lifespan of the individual» (Sergi 1889, 35). Character formation, in the history of humankind, had happened and still happened by «stratification» from the «primitive» life to the «semi-savage» to the «civilised» (Sergi 1889, 35)⁸. Primitive and ‘egoistic’ character types in the course of the generations tend to be extinguished at the behavioural level in favour of ‘altruistic’ forms but «not in the existence of constituent elements» (Sergi 1889, 35). «The primitive strata of character – in fact – are the effect not of a single period of an individual life but of several human generations; they are inherited, in their organic elements, in their physical basis without active or functional form, but capable of returning to mental activity» (Sergi 1889, 36). It was precisely the degenerative process that had the capacity to reactivate such character data;

the degeneration of physical elements in the psyche, which causes the absence or abnormality of many character features and impedes the organisation of all these psychic elements according to the individual’s living conditions, does not destroy that foundation of the atavistic character that has been consolidated over several generations; or rather gives an opportunity, when there lacks a truly normal psychic organism, for such a character to reappear in full (Sergi 1889, 43).

So, Sergi wondered anxiously

What could the addition of an adventitious element do for a hereditary or congenital character defect? What influence would be effective in eliminating this fundamental vice? There are those who believe in the correction and regeneration of a character that was born bad; there are those who do not believe in the possibility of such effects. Now I believe that we need to distinguish between various gradations of the character that is

born degenerate. If the degeneration is partial, confined to some secondary element, then correction is possible but very difficult to achieve because there can be no principles or general directive rules like those in education in general and adopting the usual methods would have no chance of success. Here we need to study each individual case as a morbidity, to see its origin and the type of defect and try to remedy it with the slow and special substitution of efficacious and ordered elements. But when the degeneration is serious and extensive, no regeneration is possible» (Sergi 1889, 42).

Thus for Sergi character degeneration resulting from a congenital defect or one caused by conditioning of the environment was often irremediable (Sergi 1889, 52) and had the same outcome, the disintegration of the character itself; the only significant difference «is in this, that degeneration resulting from a degenerate psychophysical structure usually occurs early on, while the degeneration caused by social influences can occur at all stages of life» (Sergi 1889, 51-52). In each case, «rehabilitation is a delusion of sentimentalism; it is possible only to arrest incipient disintegration, or initial degeneration» (Sergi 1889, 51-52).

So Sergi conceded very little scope for any recovery of degenerates. Indeed whatever the cause of the degeneration might be, «the effect is that character does not exist in the degenerates but remains solely in fragmentary shapes» (Sergi 1889, 58). But Sergi's main concern was that «the unhappy phenomenon of the survival of the weak» was based precisely on the hereditariness of both physical and mental degeneration, including that of character, and that the *corpo sano* of the nation was unaware of the seriousness of this phenomenon. Inferior adaptation was thus increased, lamented Sergi, «by a social factor», «the protection of the weak», «effect of unselfish feelings» characteristic of civil society (Sergi 1889, 197). Such protection culpably encouraged the reproduction of degenerates. It might be expedient for society to support 'normal' people who had suffered an accident, so as to reintegrate them in their productive capacity, but society had no interest in supporting incurable degenerates.

From this position derives Sergi's severe condemnation of private charities and also of public welfare which had done nothing but increase the number of people with hereditary defects. Conversely, «severe repressions, [...] often violent measures, through which these dangerous beings have been put to death or imprisoned, have had some effect» (Sergi 1889, 202). Thus the productive classes, and particularly the working class, might deserve the widest possible social protection but the degenerates, «those who have made no attempt to overcome life's problems» (Sergi 1889, 204) should not be the objects of social altruism: not because they were «invariably responsible for their inferior condition and therefore should be punished, but because one should not feed and protect social parasites and, by protecting them, increase them and their progeny through the encouragement of inferior adaptation» (Sergi 1889, 204). Not because they deserve to be punished but because they are a cost to society, Sergi accordingly advocated

a severe repression of degenerates, such as criminals, vagrants, professional beggars, parasites, in short those who are capable of working but harmful and dangerous to society. They should be forced to work, either freely out of doors or in suitable places like enclosures, forcing them to take a job from which they would obtain their sustenance and cloth-

ing; they might be deported to desert islands, where they would be forced to work if they wanted to live; so long as they remained in Italy, they should be prevented from having children, so that their diseases died with them and were not passed to offspring as an unhappy legacy (Sergi 1889, 227-228).

This is «artificial» selection, a salutary and indispensable corollary to natural selection (Volpone, 2008, 165 and Tedesco 2011, 59). In sum, society should not take care of degenerates and their offspring; to do so would simply waste energy and resources that could instead be directed to the support of those, among the healthy, who were at risk of degenerating because of an environment that was unsuitable for mental and physical development. Such development called essentially for three elements: sufficient nourishment; education («the most serious problem of our day»: Sergi 1889, 215), which by itself permitted the acquisition of «knowledge of one's own personal worth» (Sergi 1889, 216) and work, which «morally regenerates every individual» (Sergi 1889, 217).

Education, a truly crucial issue for Italy's entire liberal and bourgeois culture during the growth of the new Italian State, was for Sergi the main tool for assuring and increasing the status, dignity and integrity of character, on which «all individual and social conduct» depended (Sergi 1889, 215). Concerning education Sergi pronounced a true anathema upon classical teaching, which he thought was inadequate to meet the ever greater and more demanding challenges presented by the second industrial revolution: «they have given us chaotic schools» and all that university graduates asked for was «public sector jobs, being incapable of doing any other kind of work» (Sergi 1889, 220). Sergi suggested that there should be many more vocational schools concentrating on the arts, trades and commerce, «because trade and industry are predominant today and rightly so» (Sergi 1889, 220).

The anonymous (and anodyne) review that appeared in «Nuova Antologia» («New Anthology») may have defined Sergi's work as «serious and seriously thought-out» and the author as «not only an anthropologist who was nourished by rigorous studies, but also a conscientious observer» (Anonymous review 1889a, 612) and the anthropologist Vincenzo Giuffrida-Ruggeri may have noted that Sergi's concept of character stratification commendably took account of the «reappearance of the lowest strata of degeneration», understood as the outcome of «the atavism of psychic manifestations» (Giuffrida-Ruggeri 1896-1897, 157); but Paolo Mantegazza described Sergi's book as «useless; it reveals no new facts or new laws; it does not clarify obscure things, nor does it assemble scattered and confused facts in logical order» (Mantegazza 1888, 289)⁹. Sergi's definition of degenerates was «confused» and «wrong» (Mantegazza 1888, 289)¹⁰, their classification «a jumble of deplorable confusion» (Mantegazza 1888, 289)¹¹ and the mention of slaves among them clearly indicated a moralistic mixture of pathology and bourgeois ethics («a more deplorable confusion of the ethical concept and the pathological element could not be made nor conceived»: Mantegazza 1888, 290)¹².

These last observations were however attacked by the curator of the column *Riassunto di giornali scientifici* (*Résumé of Scientific Journals*) of the «Archivio di Psichiatria» («Archives of Psychiatry») (1889) as being nothing more than «despi-

cable and ignoble insults against Sergi, Lombroso and the New School». But Sergi's work, according to the «*Rivista sperimentale di freniatria*» («*Experimental Journal of Psychiatry*»), claimed «the serious attention of statesmen and educators» (Belmondo 1889, 63), who 'wanted to resolve the most difficult social questions, being scornful or ignorant about the more firmly-fixed facts of the biological sciences' (Belmondo 1889, 64).

Some of Mantegazza's observations did without doubt hit the nail on the head: the «indignation of a follower of Garibaldi who was disappointed by the post-Risorgimento compromises» (Mantovani 2004, 56) and who managed to detect in post-unification obsequiousness the final degeneration of the former slave's psychology, a degeneration that wiped out free will in whole or in part (Sergi 1889, 58) and made those who had been affected by it «unfit for great deeds and in particular [...] incapable of initiatives» (Sergi 1889, 57) fell far short of the discipline and rigour to be expected of a scientist.

Sergi's pedagogy, on the other hand, proved to be deeply infused with support for moralistic self-help and the productivist ethic: he called for virtue, self-education and moderation and indignantly rejected idleness and moral laxity (Sergi 1885)¹³. The Scottish self-help promoter Samuel Smiles had considerable success, even in Italy, with this type of teaching (Govoni 2002, 122-125).

Sergi was convinced that remembered «degenerative influences coming from the external environment» could undermine the normal development of the individual's organic functions. It must be emphasised that this conviction persuaded him to ask public authorities constantly, with a force and insistence no less than that shown by the more open socialist and liberal culture of that time (Gervasoni 1997, 1108), to adopt measures aimed at preventing the spread of such degenerative influences: in particular education, conceived as 'social hygiene', which protected the maturing character from the threat of degenerative alterations and was «a uniquely effective weapon against the randomness of environmental assaults» (Rossi 1987, 80). «Arresting moral degeneration as soon as it appears – Sergi affirmed emphatically some years after the publication of *Le degenerazioni umane* – is a salutary and very urgent task and undoubtedly one way of achieving this is education from an early age in ways that are the most suitable for the various social classes» (Sergi 1892, 13).

In subsequent years Sergi focused his attention on elementary, vocational and secondary schooling. Concerning the last of these, the new age of science and technology and of iron and steel compelled Sergi to give absolute priority to science rather than to the classics (Cavallera 1989, 689-691; Sergi 1914a, 7; Sergi 1913, 7). Along with the educational aspect, Sergi constantly had in mind the aspect of coercion; this necessarily derived from his conviction, as we have seen, of the near-impossibility of remedying a degeneration that was already in progress.

The Comitato italiano per gli studi di Eugenia and the turning point of World War I. In *Degenerazioni umane* Sergi was convinced of the hereditariness of acquired characteristics. This conviction was reaffirmed in *Problemi di scienza con-*

temporanea (Problems of Contemporary Science) (Sergi 1904, 155). The picture changes with his report to the first International Eugenics Congress in London in July 1912 (Sergi 1912), an event that marked the discovery of eugenics on the part of a large Italian delegation made up of anthropologists, biologists, demographers, sociologists and psychiatrists. In his report Sergi was obliged to take into consideration the renewed interest in the laws of Mendel, revealed for the first time in Italy by the botanist Giuseppe Cuboni in 1903 in his studies on hybridism (Volpone 2008, 12). In this forum Sergi suspended judgment concerning the hereditariness of acquired characteristics («Are the variations presented by the living of just one type or of various types? And are all of them transmitted in the same way, whatever their nature, or only some?» in Sergi 1912, 9).

Two years later Sergi did not take a clear position on the applicability to mankind of the genetic heredity laws formulated by Mendel; but he made a distinction between 'normal' and 'morbid' hereditariness (Sergi 1914b, 373)¹⁴. On this last point, Sergi emphasised, there were no doubts: «We can affirm only one thing as an unquestionable fact and that is the existence of morbid and abnormal heredity, which is multiple and wide-ranging; but we cannot provide definite proof of its origin and causes» (Sergi 1914b, 373)¹⁵. In London even Morselli, in his report *Persistenza e variazione dei caratteri di razza (The Persistence and Variation of Racial Characteristics)* espoused the mixed notion of hereditary transmission of characteristics that attempted to reconcile Mendelian laws and the hereditariness of acquired characteristics (Mantovani 2004, 77). Other anthropologists and eugenicists, for example Mantegazza, refused to alter even «a comma of their own former opinion», totally rejecting the applicability to mankind of Mendel's discoveries (Volpone 2008, 182).

It was precisely his bitter awareness of «morbid and abnormal» hereditariness that drove Sergi, on the occasion of the reunion of the Società romana di Antropologia on 21 March 1913, to propose the establishment of a centre for the study of eugenics, like the ones that had already been created in France and Denmark (*Verbali delle adunanze della Società romana di Antropologia (Minutes of the Meetings held by the Roman Society of Anthropology)* 1913, 512). To this end contacts were set up with the Eugenics Education Society in London.

At the suggestion of Sergi himself and the anthropologist Alfredo Niceforo, the assembly discussed the establishment of an Italian Committee for the Study of Eugenics (*Atti del Comitato italiano per gli studi di Eugenetica (Minutes of the Meetings held by the Italian Committee for the Study of Eugenics)* 1913, 543)¹⁶. On 7 April the board of directors appointed a temporary Commission, tasked with drawing up the Committee's programme. The members of this temporary Commission, in addition to Sergi and Niceforo, were the statistician Corrado Gini, the psychiatrists Antonio Marro and Giovanni Mingazzini and Sergi's assistant at the Istituto di Antropologia (Institute of Anthropology) at the University of Rome, Umberto Saffiotti.

The Commission elected Sergi as chairman and Saffiotti as secretary. In the Commission's first circular letter of 1 June 1913, we read that the objective of the

Committee was to be «the study of factors that could determine the progress or decline of races, whether in their physical or mental aspect, carrying out for example researches on the heredity of normal or pathological characteristics, on the influence of the environment and lifestyle of the parents on the characters of their children, on the importance of the temporary conditions of the organism for the act of reproduction, on the influence of the lifestyle or environment in which the new organism develops» (*Atti del Comitato italiano per gli studi di Eugenia* 1913, 543-544).

The Commission then announced that the first general assembly of Committee members would take place on 17 November 1913. On that occasion the statute was approved and the board of directors was appointed; Sergi was chairman for the two-year period: 1914-1915. The board members were Sante De Sanctis, the zoologist Cesare Artom, Corrado Gini, the gynaecologist Luigi Mangiagalli, Alfredo Niceforo, Umberto Saffiotti and Miss L.M. Underwood, a member of the Istituto internazionale di Agricoltura (International Institute of Agriculture) in Rome.

By that time dozens of experts had joined the Committee, including anthropologists, psychiatrists, psychologists, gynaecologists, physiologists, zoologists, anatomists, jurists, statisticians and economists, forensic scientists, professors of clinical medicine and medical officers (for a full list see Mantovani 2004, 80-82).

The Statute stated in its article 2 that the purpose of the Committee ought not to be merely «the study of factors that could improve or worsen the quality of future generations», but also the definition of the «relevant measures». To this end the Committee supported an enquiry into the scientific output of its supporters, aimed at classifying the works within the two sections of the International Catalogue of Eugenics: «general or theoretical eugenics» and «applied eugenics». In the latter we find ‘persuasive’ proposals («education in families and schools», «propaganda among adults»); ‘protective’ ones («measures aimed at improving the fecundity of eugenic couples, prizes for prolific couples, polygamy, limiting the fecundity of non-eugenic couples, etc.») but also ‘coercive’ measures («obligatory schooling, obligatory physical education in schools, hygienic measures, prophylactic measures etc.», «segregation, deportation of the dysgenic, suppression of idiots, of the insane, of those born grossly deformed, etc», «requirement of medical marriage certificates, age limits and limits on the age difference between spouses, prohibition of marriage between the consanguineous, etc.»), «sterilisation, vasectomy, ovariectomy» (*Atti del Comitato italiano per gli studi di Eugenia* 1913, 552).

It is unquestionably true that the most radical of such proposals, for example sterilisation, had the support only of a minority in the field of Italian eugenic thinking (Cassata 2006, 114-125). They were not put into effect even by the Fascist regime, that was concerned with ‘populationist’ eugenics (Mantovani 2004, 285-345).

The Catholic Church agreed with a ‘quantitative’ approach¹⁷. The Church, in fact, did not agree to direct interference in the reproductive processes except for protecting maternity, rejecting the lawfulness of ‘qualitative’ eugenic interventions aimed at ensuring the superior biological quality of the community. The encyclical *Casti Connubii* of December 1930 accordingly condemned not only sterilisation

and abortion but also more cautious measures such as the pre-marriage certificate.

Sergi, at the time of the initial meeting of the Committee, was circumspect in regard to requests for legislative measures that would limit personal freedom for the purpose of protecting public health; such measures had been advanced by Mingazzini, the jurist Lorenzo Ratto and the economist Achille Loria. Sergi justified his reluctance not on ideological grounds but because he considered that «[we are] far from being able to profit from what is still being discussed in the field of science» (*Verbali delle adunanze della Società romana di Antropologia (Minutes of the Meetings held by the Roman Society of Anthropology)* 1913, 513).

In the following year Sergi stated the need to «eliminate the human beings who bear hereditary pathological and degenerative defects in whatever way such elimination can be carried out» (Sergi 1914b, 378) and reaffirmed the uselessness of education for «defectives», who could beget only «criminals, prostitutes, lunatics, maniacs, vagrants and beggars» (Sergi 1914b, 379).

He specified however that matrimonial prohibitions were ineffective and would merely augment the number of illegitimate children and that sterilisation was probably not supported by «universal opinion» (Sergi 1914b, 375). Among the eugenic remedies propounded by the Anglo-Saxon school of thought, segregation was the only one that did not prompt Sergi to raise moral objections or doubts about effectiveness, provided that such segregation was not «permanent» (Sergi 1914b, 375). It is therefore possible to advance the hypothesis that the 'elimination' referred to above would for Sergi have consisted in the adoption of segregation measures for degenerates during their fertile years.

The Great War acted as a potent catalyst in the eugenics debate, as can easily be understood. A great many Italian eugenicists, Sergi in particular, identified the War as «an irreversible factor in racial decadence» (Cassata 2006, 52) and a dreadful experiment in «wrong eugenics» (Aveta 1915, 4): wrong in that modern warfare indiscriminately eliminated both the less and the more 'suitable', or rather entrusted the reproductive function for the most part to those exempted from military service, who were certainly biologically inferior to the servicemen, and to mothers affected by wartime and post-war economic restrictions and by serious pathologies of the nervous system.

In his *L'eugenica e la decadenza delle nazioni (Eugenics and the Decadence of Nations)* (1916a; but see also Sergi 1917), in which he introduced «the fertile chapter of the dysgenic consequences [...] of war» (Mantovani 2004, 201; see also Quine 2012, 103), Sergi summarised his position on eugenics in the following terms: eugenics

has up till now had a dual purpose in human society: to assist the normal development of healthy individuals and to halt morbid heredity. For the first purpose we need to create all the favourable conditions for preserving individuals who do not present pathogenic defects; this would help to combine all society's efforts towards individual and social preservation. The second purpose would be the elimination of the elements whom, to make things clear, let us call degenerate, not in the sense of getting rid of them, but by impeding the inheriting of such elements, which would multiply the number and quality of degenerates if they were allowed to procreate freely (Sergi 1916a, 3)¹⁸.

This last sentence would seem to allude to sterilisation, which Sergi had however rejected two years earlier. Once more, in the absence of an explicit position, we can only speculate on whether Sergi would have consented to a segregationist policy that would prevent degenerates from reproducing.

Conclusions. Sergi was a truly radical champion of that «secular and scientific paradigm of the grasp and management of social reality», the fruit «of the extraordinary cultural legitimisation conferred on scientific thinking by unprecedented technological progress» (Mantovani 2004, 356-357). For Sergi the educative momentum was critically important within a project of social engineering that ended with the creation of a society peacefully devoted to the maximisation of levels of production (Mantovani 2004, 61; Tedesco 2011, 55). A secular education, firmly directed by the State, could have turned out to be for Sergi a powerful eugenic tool aimed at preventing degenerative processes in individuals and thus decadence in the entire national system (Tedesco 2012, 55-84). Sergi therefore, along with Morselli, was among the authors most valued by Italian positivistic pedagogy (Rossi 1987, 80). Sergi may have regarded education as an indispensable tool for the perfecting of healthy individuals and the prevention of environmental degenerative pathologies, but its limits were all too clear in dealing with the degenerative phenomena in existence.

Sergi's thinking on the curbing of such phenomena was to undergo a significant evolution, which we have considered to be worthy of investigating in depth in this essay.

In his wide-ranging and much discussed work of 1889, *Le degenerazioni umane*, Sergi called explicitly for segregation and implicitly also for sterilisation to check degenerative processes.

Despite the progressive spread in Italy at the beginning of the 20th century of Mendel's discoveries, Sergi continued to hold the view that degeneration was hereditary.

He went back to studying eugenics in detail during World War I, a pre-eminently dysgenic event, but became convinced of the impracticability of sterilisation, branded as immoral by the greater part of public opinion. Despite his continuous calls for the elimination of degenerates, it is possible to speculate that segregation remained for Sergi the only practicable measure of negative eugenics.

¹ Francis Galton, a half-cousin of Charles Darwin, coined the term eugenics (Galton 1883).

² This periodical was one of the most representative of Italian evolutionary theory and received the endorsement of among others Spencer, Haeckel, Broca, Topinard and De Greef (Marhaba 2003, 105). Salvatore Vasta defines it as a «true organ of Italian Darwinism» (Vasta

2007, 76). Dina Bertoni Jovine describes it as «the most classic document» of naturalistic positivism in philosophy (1973, 694).

³ For further biographical information see the obituary written by the editors of «Rivista di Antropologia» (*Direzione della Rivista di Antropologia* 1937).

⁴ «The first shot fired in the great criminal debates of the 1880s and 1890s was the publi-

cation in 1876 of Cesare Lombroso's *L'uomo delinquente*» (Nye 1984, 99).

⁵ Mingazzini (1889, 641) gave Sergi the credit for having warned about the serious consequences in the moral sphere of various degenerative processes.

⁶ Credit is definitely due to Volpone for having recorded that in the evolutionist culture of the late 19th century, and thus also in Sergi, Darwin's theory of natural selection was not regarded as irreconcilable with Lamarck's theory of heritability of acquired characteristics (Volpone 2011, 61-64). Darwin himself conceded that heritability had a role, if only a secondary one, in the modification of species (Gould 2002, 179).

⁷ Blame for a large number of the degenerative physico-psychic conditions that alarmed the social hygienists of the era was attributed to the advent of the industrial society. «Anaemia, nervous weakness, frailness, scrofula, deformed bones that led to rickets» (Mosso 1898, 159 e Bonetta 1990, 253-258) were the consequences of poor adaptation by the former peasant to urban conditions.

⁸ Sergi's theory of character stratification has been acknowledged as «an anticipation of the foundations of present-day psychoanalysis» (Lambertini 1970, 465).

Sergi (1889, 493-499) stated that the brain was a product of strata formed during various evolutionary stages and believed in the increased capacity for conditioning the individual behavior of the oldest ones, or the 'emotional' ones, in comparison with the more recent, or the 'rational' ones (Ginneken 1991, 53). This seems to anticipate some discoveries in neuro-physiology, which placed the area of rationality in the prefrontal cortex, evolutionally more recent than the limbic system, seat of affectivity and emotiveness (see Benini 2009 for a recent overall if somewhat critical view of the acquisitions of neurosciences on these themes).

⁹ L'«Archivio per l'Antropologia e la etnologia» («Archives for Anthropology and Ethnology») was the organ of the Società italiana di Antropologia, Etnologia e Psicologia comparata (Italian Society of Anthropology, Ethnology and Comparative Psychology). Mantegazza, together with Sergi, was one of the most influential exponents of Italian evolutionist anthropology (Puccini, 1985, 107). From 1879 Sergi collaborated with Mantegazza's Florentine school, but broke away from it unexpectedly in 1893 to found, as stated, the Società Romana di

Antropologia, provoking «a real schism in the Italian ethno-anthropologist community» and the «most sensational scientific rupture» (Puccini 1985, 108 and 107) in the first 40 years of the history of Italian anthropology. The disagreement reached its height, in addition to probably to personality clashes and academic jealousies, concerning «craniological reform» on a polygenetic base drawn up by Sergi, who opposed Mantegazza's monogenism as being «in truth quite other than rigorous» (Puccini 1985, 108) and «above all the criteria for the classification of crania that were diffused and widespread in Italian scientific circles» (Puccini, 1985, 108).

¹⁰ In his review Mantegazza curiously did not supply what for him ought to have been a correct definition of the concept of degeneration.

¹¹ To add to the insults, Mantegazza specified: «Sergi has a very confused instinct for the truth and in his tireless research, indefatigable with whatever he is pursuing, he nearly always loses sight of it; therefore in his works of philosophical synthesis he wraps himself up in a jumble of confused definitions, labyrinthine reasoning and not infrequently sophisms» (Mantegazza 1888, 289).

¹² «The chapters dealing with slaves and slavery, and parasites» have been described as 'odd', also by the Anonymous review that appeared in «Rivista di Filosofia Scientifica» (1889b, 251).

¹³ All these cultural attitudes, according to Bonetta (1990, 23), were 'admirably' expressed in Sergi's works.

¹⁴ This is the text of the inauguration address by the Eugenics Section of the Società Italiana per il Progresso delle Scienze. The Society's meeting, planned to be held in Bari that same year, was delayed to the following year and held in Rome.

¹⁵ Volpone has made a very good reconstruction of Sergi's progressive but partial adhesion to Mendelism (Volpone 2011, 64).

¹⁶ This was the only issue of the Committee's *Atti*, published together with the aforementioned *Verbali* by the «Rivista di Antropologia», the organ of the Committee itself. But the documentation tells us nothing about the preparatory work for the founding meeting of the Committee and the role played by its proponents, Sergi and Niceforo.

¹⁷ But Quine showed that fascist eugenics and the one promoted by the Church did not converge (Quine 2012, 144: where it is explained that «Italian eugenics charted a path that repre-

sented a [...] 'Third Way' option between hereditarianism and environmentalism»).

¹⁸ «Repressive laws, often cruel but necessary

for the social good, have helped to decrease the number of dangerous and antisocial degenerates» (Sergi 1916b, 275).

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Summary

Latin and Nordic Eugenics in the project of racial improvement set up by Giuseppe Sergi, founder of the Comitato italiano per gli studi di Eugenia (Italian Committee for the Study of Eugenics)

Giuseppe Sergi was one of the greatest exponents of physical and evolutionist anthropology in Italy at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. He was also rightly regarded as a champion of the positive eugenics, characteristic of the Latin countries, that aimed to identify the biological and environmental factors that could be utilised socially to prevent degenerative pathologies and thus favour the reproduction and perfecting of desirable individuals. But Sergi's proposals concerning degenerative processes that were taking place have not been sufficiently examined in scientific literature about eugenics. These proposals underwent a significant evolution from Sergi's book *Le degenerazioni umane (Human Degeneracies)* (1889) to articles published close to and during World War I. We have regarded this evolution as worthy of being studied in depth in this essay.

While Sergi did indeed call for the drastic measures of negative eugenics for degenerates in his treatise at the end of the 19th century, in the course of World War I (a pre-eminently dysgenic event) he became convinced of the impracticability of sterilisation, branded as immoral by public opinion. Thus despite his constant calls for the elimination of degenerates, it is possible to speculate that, for Sergi, segregation remained the only practicable measure of negative eugenics.

Riassunto

Eugenetica 'latina' e 'nordica' nel progetto di perfezionamento razziale di Giuseppe Sergi, fondatore del Comitato italiano per gli studi di Eugenia

Giuseppe Sergi, uno dei maggiori esponenti dell'antropologia fisica ed evolucionista in Italia tra la fine dell'Ottocento e l'inizio del Novecento, è stato a ragione considerato anche un campione di quell'eugenetica positiva, caratteristica dei Paesi latini, volta ad individuare i fattori, sia biologici che ambientali, utilizzabili socialmente per prevenire patologie degenerative e favorire così la riproduzione e il perfezionamento dei soggetti desiderabili. Ciò che invece la letteratura scientifica in tema di eugenetica non ha sufficientemente scandagliato sono le proposte di Sergi nei confronti dei processi degenerativi in corso. Tali proposte avrebbero conosciuto una significativa evoluzione, che abbiamo ritenuto meritevole di approfondire in questo saggio, dalle *Degenerazioni umane* del 1889 agli articoli pubblicati a ridosso e durante la prima guerra mondiale.

Mentre nella sua monografia di fine Ottocento, Sergi avrebbe infatti invocato le misure drastiche dell'eugenetica negativa per i degenerati, nel corso della prima guerra mondiale, evento disgenico per eccellenza, si sarebbe convinto dell'impraticabilità della sterilizzazione, tacciata di immoralità dall'opinione pubblica. Nonostante le continue invocazioni, così, all'eliminazione dei degenerati, è possibile ipotizzare come la segregazione rimanesse per Sergi l'unica misura praticabile di eugenetica negativa.

Keywords

Eugenics; Degeneration; Artificial selection; Education; Giuseppe Sergi.

Parole chiave

Eugenetica; Degenerazione; Selezione artificiale; Educazione; Giuseppe Sergi.