

Eugenics as Social Observation: Anthropology, Statistics and the Pursuit of 'Objectivity' in Alfredo Niceforo's Thought (1876-1960)*

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1. Introduction. In a letter to the president of the Accademia dei Lincei on January 11, 1955 Alfredo Niceforo – a member of the prestigious institution since 1948 – was deeply 'embarrassed' as he was requested which works, among his writings, he considered his own most successful (AAL-1). It was not the first time that Niceforo had the opportunity to portray his scientific *persona*². When he retired just two years before, Niceforo had been publicly honored at the University of Rome 'La Sapienza' by the President of the Republic Luigi Einaudi, the president of the Accademia dei Lincei, the Minister of Education, and the President of the Istat. Yet they all had troubles describing Niceforo's multifaceted activity within a single academic discipline (Niceforo, Papi 1956). Their uncertainty was due to the wide range of topics that Niceforo had written about for over half a century, from racial anthropology to statistics, demography, eugenics and criminology.

In this paper, I use Alfredo Niceforo's figure to highlight a specific character of Italian eugenics. In particular, I explore from a biographical perspective the role of anthropology and statistics in Niceforo's eugenics, which I analyze here as a project of social scientific observation. As Lorraine Daston and Elizabeth Lunbeck have shown (2011), scientific observation has its own history, only loosely tied to the history of single scientific disciplines. This point is crucial because Italian eugenics was never established as an independent scientific discipline. Rather, eugenic plans and ideas were developed among demographers, statisticians, anthropologists, and sociologists amid far less rigid disciplinary boundaries. The blending of different approaches and Niceforo's ensuing mixture of several disciplines in his work were not accidental features of Italian eugenics. Rather, they are central to understand the social scientific appeal of eugenics and Niceforo's pursuit of 'objectivity'.

Niceforo's intellectual path allows an investigation of the cultural history of Italian eugenics within the broader context of the birth of the Italian social sciences.

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In particular, I am going to stress two aspects: the visualization of data to produce 'objectivity' in the social sciences and the intellectual identity that Niceforo managed to forge for himself as a criminologist, physical anthropologist, statisticians and demographer. Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have highlighted the power of images for the production of 'objectivity', whereas Theodor Porter has analyzed the process of quantification as a crucial means to build scientific authority (Daston, Galison 2007; Porter 1995). In this respect, I use Niceforo's 'biographical illusion' (Bourdieu 1986; Terrall 2006) to illustrate for the Italian case a crucial knot in the history of eugenics: the pursuit of scientific objectivity and eugenicists' self-fashioning as objective social scientists. The broader framework of Niceforo's activity was the 'totalitarian character' of Italian statistics and demography as fields that were able to encompass other disciplines, such as sociology and eugenics. As Carl Ipsen and Jean-Guy Prévost have shown, such 'totalitarian' feature of Italian statistics was due to the belief in the universal versatility of the statistical method, but also to demographers' embedded role within the administrative apparatus of the fascist regime (Ipsen 1996; Prévost 2009). This factor contributed to the 'invisible nature' of Italian eugenics, which have been concealed in texts about public health, demography, anthropology and statistics. Niceforo's eclectic figure is a clear example of the 'multipositional' nature of nineteenth century savants well into the Twentieth century, especially in the domain of eugenics and scientific racism (Berlivet 2008).

Because it would be impossible to account here for Niceforo's entire trajectory, this contribution focuses on three crucial moments of his activity as statistician, demographer and eugenicist: the role of statistics in the racial studies of his youth, his activity at the Direzione Generale di Statistica (DirStat, General Direction of Statistics) in the liberal period, and his 'invention' of the method of the *graphic profile*, namely Niceforo's contribution to Nicola Pende's Latin eugenics in the fascist period. Niceforo's quest for objectivity used statistics as a solution to the methodological issues that had troubled the positivist school at the turn of the century. Finally, I use Corrado Gini's critique of the *graphic profile* to highlight how Niceforo's goal of achieving social scientific objectivity derived from his broader concerns in criminal anthropology but remained a contested and ultimately unsuccessful effort.

2. Statistics, Crime and Race. Niceforo belonged to the third generation of Cesare Lombroso's school of criminal anthropology and his direct teacher was the lawyer and socialist MP Enrico Ferri, Lombroso's main collaborator (Gibson 2002; Villa 2011). Even if Lombroso taught in Turin, Niceforo's activity in Rome benefited of the positivist culture of the capital at the intersection between Enrico Ferri's criminal sociology and Giuseppe Sergi's physical anthropology developed at the Anthropological Society of Rome (Società romana di Antropologia) (Gillette 2002; De Donno 2006). Ferri provided Niceforo with the initial framework for his analysis of criminality and Sergi with the anthropological background for his racial theory.

In his early works, Niceforo argued that the differences in crime, economy and

culture between northern and southern Italy were due to the racial difference between the Mediterranean race coming from Africa in the South and a Celtic-Aryan of the North. While the racial argument of Niceforo's texts has attracted a great deal of interest, very little attention has been paid to his methodology. In *Criminality in Sardinia* (*La delinquenza in Sardegna*), Niceforo's use of statistics was rather simple. He gathered official criminal figures and the numbers provided by Luigi Bodio, director of the board of statistics and member of the geographic society (Niceforo 1897a). Therefore he identified a 'criminal area' (*zona delinquente*) in Sardinia thanks to the correspondence between statistical rates of crime and the anthropometric measurements of 120 skulls and 121 individuals that he took personally in comparison to those that Sergi had at the University of Rome (Niceforo 1896). Maps and statistical charts were used to boost his evidence.

Instead *La mala vita a Roma* was considered a non-scientific text because of its lack of anthropometric measures (Niceforo, Sighele 1898). Fieldwork without statistical quantification was not enough. The modern and scientific part of Niceforo's argument in *L'Italia barbara contemporanea* was the use of statistics and anthropological measurements. Sociology, anthropology, and statistics were allied to detect figures of civilization: «Statistics as well as sociology will be the indexes that will reveal the striking difference of civil life between the two Italies and the scholar's eye will discern a sharp difference of civilization, in sociological observation as well as in statistical figures» (Niceforo 1898, 16).

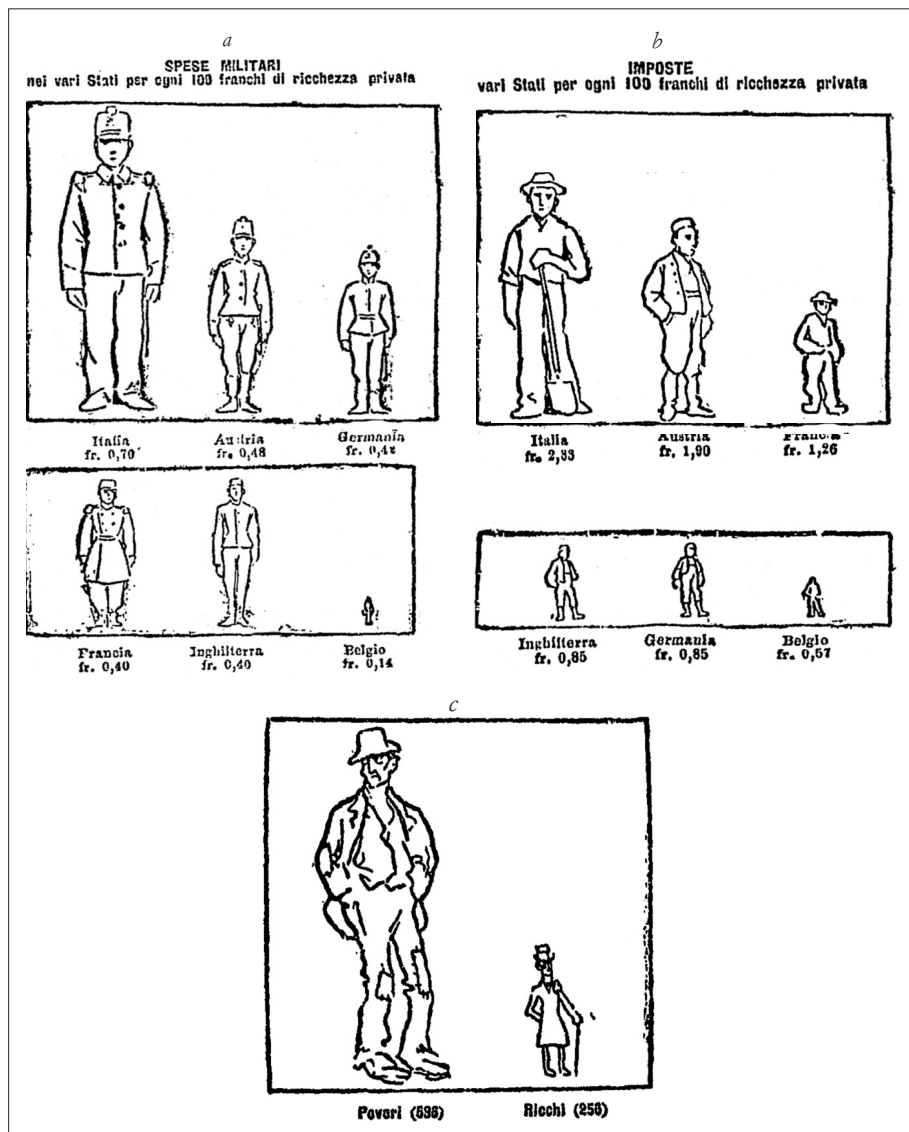
Italiani del Nord e italiani del Sud described the dichotomy between North and Southern Italy even more starkly (Niceforo 1901). In addition to differences in race and psychology, Niceforo illustrated through statistics differences in nutrition, educational infrastructures, criminality, economy and demography. Probably under the influence of Francesco Saverio Nitti's *Nord e Sud* (Nitti 1900), Niceforo dealt not just with physical anthropology, but also with a mixture of economic and demographic data.

Despite Niceforo's work on the Southern Question, it would have been difficult to forecast his future as statistician or as eugenicist. Between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth he published extensively on criminology, following Ferri and Sighele's examples of criminological studies in literature³. He could have followed the legal criminological tradition – a point that has been developed by Mary Gibson (2002). Instead, he left the country as correspondent of several newspapers and in particular the socialist «Avanti!», at the time when Enrico Ferri was leader of the socialist party (Nani 2006)⁴.

It is possible that the negative reaction to Niceforo's racial thesis had a role in his long period abroad. Yet, the rejection of his thesis in the Italian academic community should be de-emphasized. Following the debate about the cursed race, Niceforo entertained a long correspondence with his most vocal critic, Napoleone Colajanni, which culminated with their collaboration in statistics⁵. Niceforo's theory of the two races did not disqualify him forever from the Italian intellectual community.

Niceforo maintained a vivid interest in the representation of statistical data even

Fig. 1. Pictures for the popularization of comparative statistical data



Source: «Avanti», May 18 (a and b) and 21 (c), 1903.

during his activity as reporter for the socialist newspaper «Avanti!» (Niceforo 1903). He started a regular section called «hisses and applause» in May 1903 that stood out for its antimilitarism and anticlericalism. One of his favorite targets was the German emperor, the embodiment of militarism. But popular costumes, politics and general curiosities tended to turn the column into a haphazard collection

of impressions and irreverent judgments. A peculiarity of this intervention was the representation of official statistics through little sketches, drawings and graphics to popularize information against taxation and military expenses, or to highlight differences of mortality between upper and lower classes (fig. 1).

Where did Niceforo find these data? His interests in criminology and statistics sustained each other, as Niceforo relied largely on the statistics published in the «Annuaire statistique de la ville de Paris» by the Jacques and Luis-Adolphe Bertillon, the father and brother of Alphonse Bertillon (Porter 1986). Alphonse Bertillon (1853-1914) was the director of the police department in Paris and is a fundamental figure for the history of identification (Kaluszynski 2001). Inspired by Bertillon, Niceforo proposed a ‘cadaster of identities’ for the entire population or at least for some professional groups (Niceforo 1908). Later he presented this project also at the first Italian Congress of Ethnography on October 19-24, 1911 but his proposal was not accepted because he lacked institutional support.

Niceforo gathered published data from all over Europe and in particular Rodolfo Livi’s military anthropometrical research, as he was not yet working personally on the production of statistical data (Farolfi 1984), but his interest in statistics did not lead him to abandon anthropological research. For example, he analyzed one hundred skulls of southern Italian peasants borrowed from the anthropological laboratory in Naples of Angelo Zuccarelli, the only Italian supporter of negative eugenics, namely compulsory sterilization (Niceforo 1907, 14)⁶. As Niceforo wrote to Robert Michels, the skulls came from several mass graves around Sepino, a village in the South⁷. The major challenge for the analysis of the degeneration of the lower classes, their work and their psychological differences from the upper classes was to turn into figures and numbers their actions and their psychology.

Like most Italian eugenicists except Zuccarelli, Niceforo was strongly in favor of positive eugenics. Only in a book on sexual crimes such as homosexuality and prostitution that he published in his very early youth he mentioned the need of locking up ‘incurable criminals’ in order to prevent them from reproducing and spreading their criminal heredity (Niceforo 1897b, 164). However, the overwhelming majority of that essay dealt with ‘criminals’ that had acquired those characteristics. Niceforo was more interested in labor conditions, racial health, and environmental impact on human intellectual and psychological development. His eugenics matured out of his concerns in criminology, race and statistics.

3. Measuring ‘Intelligence’: Niceforo at the *Direzione Generale di Statistica*.

Lombroso died on October 19, 1909. His death is usually considered the symbolic end of Italian positivism and of his school at the same time. Intellectual historians and sociologist have considered Lombroso’s school and Italian positivism alike as doomed at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century under the attacks of Italian idealist philosophers Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile. However, while Lombroso’s legacy seem to disappear from Italy’s intellectual history, it survived in the practices of younger positivists.

In Niceforo’s case, the positivist tradition migrated to an apparently new and

different field: the production of statistics. Less than one year after Lombroso's death, Niceforo took office at the Direzione Generale di Statistica (DirStat), which at that time was part of the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry and Commerce (Ipsen 1996, 37-40). Since then, Niceforo became a professional statistician and started using statistics in a more sophisticated fashion than in his early studies about Southern Italy. Statistics became the crucial method to defend his ideas about criminology and anthropology on more solid scientific bases.

When and where did Niceforo learn statistics? How did his conversion from criminology to statistics take place? At that time, rudimentary statistics were taught in Italy within law departments but the field was not institutionalized yet. The contemporary methodological and epistemological crisis in criminal anthropology motivated Niceforo's interest in statistics. In an article crucial for the development of his career, *Qualche questione di metodo nelle ricerche di antropologia criminale* (*Some Methodological Issues in Criminal Anthropological Research*), Niceforo argued that the use of statistics was fundamental in order to establish correlations between criminal behavior and anthropological characters (Niceforo 1911a; 1912a). He applied for the first time in his writings variable calculus to anthropometric measures in order to attack empirical uses of figures and the simplistic use of the averages (Niceforo 1911b).

In the same years of the beginning of his activity at DirStat and in coincidence with the preparation for the first Eugenics Congress in London in 1912, Niceforo started a process of mathematization of his figures and internationalization of his work. For example, he began quoting famous eugenicists such as Karl Pearson, Charles Davenport and Francis Galton. However, Niceforo's inability to read and speak English would always hamper his contacts with American and British eugenicists.

While working at the DirStat after the first eugenic congress, Niceforo published articles on statistics that could especially be relevant in the perspective of Italian eugenics, for example on the variability of the weight of babies depending on the working conditions of their mothers (Niceforo 1913a). Such studies were in line with Niceforo's concern about the role of fatigue in the environmental deterioration of the 'race', especially for the lower classes. Niceforo used Quetelet's bell curve to highlight how men were different in their physical and psychological characteristics⁸. «The presence of an amount of men bearing inferior characters in physical and psychical degrees is a constant fact ... and we flatter ourselves that we bring in these views the precision of measurement and figures», he argued⁹. The inevitability of the distribution of population in superior and inferior groups through segregation entailed the constant formation of hierarchies (Niceforo 1922; 1923). Thus, Niceforo's approach to demography and eugenics was deeply indebted to Quetelet.

The study of intelligence was a major concern in eugenics since Francis Galton's research about the hereditability of genius (Galton 1869; 1892). In another paper, Niceforo argued that intellectual characteristics followed the same statistical distribution of physical and biological characters and complained that statistical figures

gathered by the DirStat previously did not register the data on the proficiency of students in college quantitatively but qualitatively (1913b). Therefore, when he was appointed for the reorganization of the DirStat by the Minister of Agriculture Raineri and confirmed in that role by Francesco Saverio Nitti, he proposed a reform of the collection of data on higher education, press and libraries in the country in order to calculate «the most important index to measure the civilization of a people, namely its intellectual life» (Niceforo 1912c, 13; 1912b).

Two main characteristics of his program should be emphasized. First, Niceforo insisted on the centralization of the collection of data that the DirStat had to accomplish. The institute would have issued a set of cards designed by Niceforo in order to track every student and calculate his academic performances in standard and quantifiable terms, while also receiving information on his familiar background and his intellectual inclination. Such information, filled in all the universities of the country, would have been shipped back to the DirStat at the end of every year. Results in the exams would have been useful to calculate the index of intelligence among the students. Secondly, he proposed the making of a «register of the population in school» that would have organized the huge amount of cards shipped and received back by the DirStat with a similar technic to Bertillon's anthropometric archive in Paris to control recidivists. Niceforo borrowed criminological practices to contribute to the making of statistics – whose data, in return, would have been useful for surveys of population on a wide scale. Thanks to statistics, Niceforo had a new method to investigate his concerns about the characters of groups of population.

The inefficiency of the Italian liberal state frustrated Niceforo's efforts. The DirStat was far from its peak of efficiency after the death of its founder Luigi Bodio and the office was in urgent need of reform (Favero 2011). Niceforo complained in a letter to the Minister of Agriculture and later Prime Minister, Francesco Saverio Nitti, about the absolute lack of funding and personnel of the DirStat:

Rome, February 24 [1911]

Dear Professor,

I cannot see you and talk to you, so I am writing you. Here the General Board of Statistics is doomed. There is no general director. One of the two chiefs of section is missing and the other one, Raseri, is ill and is not going to come back to the office (he is in bed). There are two censuses on our shoulders. Nobody talks about restructuring [the board]. The law on the reorganization is immediately necessary, if we do not want to kill the Board, which is likely. Would you please talk about it with Luzzatti, along with Colajanni and Ferri, in order to show him not only the necessity, but also the urgency of the matter? Everything for the sake of statistics... and a bit of mine. My position here, if it is not clear and neat, is unsustainable and in June my mission is over. I am writing to Colajanni¹⁰.

His own career and the general 'interest of statistics' were inextricably linked in Niceforo's mind. Despite Nitti's attempts of reform, the limited means of the liberal state for the DirStat allowed Niceforo to work only on the data he could gather on education and those he found published elsewhere, even in newspapers and news from athletic events (Niceforo 1913c; 1916a). Thus, Niceforo left the DirStat in 1913 and started teaching statistics in Naples in 1921 thanks to his new academ-

ic patron, Francesco Saverio Nitti, who was repeatedly asked support by Niceforo for this prestigious nomination later (ASFE-2, 15 September, 10 and 15 October 1921). The relationship between Nitti and Niceforo continued during and after the Great War, during Niceforo's activity in France as a sanitary statistician and at the Italian delegation at the Peace Conference of Versailles in 1919, when Nitti was Prime Minister (Niceforo 1916b)¹¹. Niceforo's politics hid behind his statistics, such as when he supported Italy's claims at the Peace Conference in Versailles with statistical data (Niceforo 1919b).

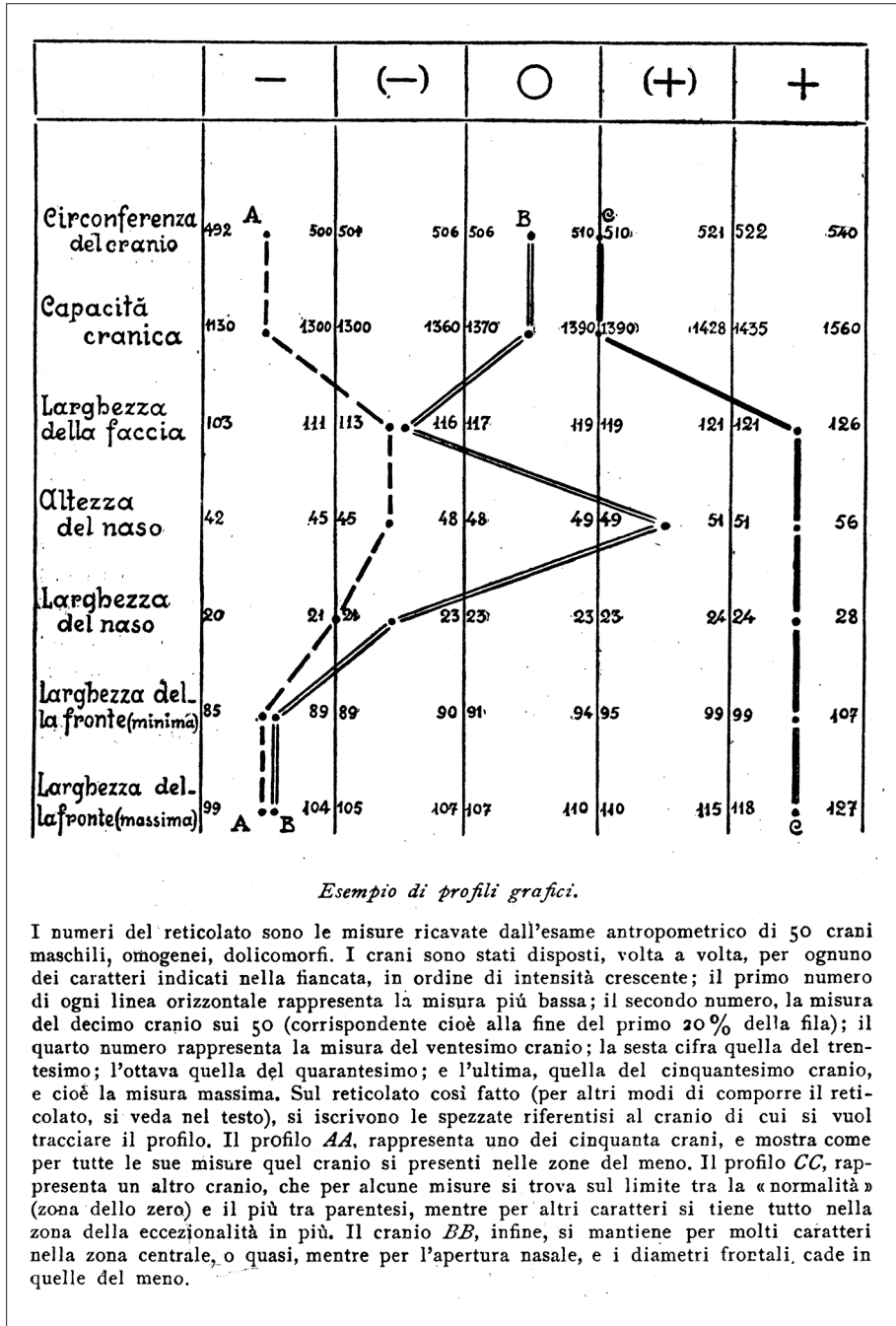
Niceforo started his career clearly within Ferri's and Sergi's Socialist galaxy at the turn of the century as a critic of the liberal establishment. Yet he gained his academic position thanks to political negotiations and personal relationships typical of the liberal period. This position, after the debates and critiques of the polemical writings of his youth, led him to relinquish any open participation in politics. As a petit bourgeois nurtured in academia and in the bureaucracy, Niceforo used the apparently impenetrable and neutral work of statistics to portray himself as a neutral and scientific *persona*, weather political uncertainties, and survive the advent of fascism in 1922.

4. The Method of the *Graphic Profile*: Disciplinary Boundaries and Eugenics. While Nitti had to leave the country after Mussolini's takeover of power, Niceforo remained for the entire fascist dictatorship a member of the Consiglio Superiore di Statistica, the highest statistical institution supervising the Istat, and in 1929 he was even advanced to a position at the University of Rome (Leti 1996). The Istat – the reformed Italian Institute of Statistics – became under Corrado Gini the main means of totalitarian oversight for the fascist regime¹². Gini was the most important reformer of Italian statistics, the controller of the Istat, Italy's leading statistician and the ideologue of fascist demographic, eugenic and imperialistic policies. As Carl Ipsen, Jean-Guy Prévost, and Francesco Cassata have highlighted, statistics became under the regime a totalitarian science at the service of the state (Ipsen 1996; Prévost 2009; Cassata 2006; 2011).

Niceforo remained quite distant from Gini in the decade 1922-1932. In the map of statistics' 'multipolar field' in Italy, he was far closer to Gini's major critic, Livio Livi (Prévost 2009, 137). They collaborated to the editorial board of the same journal, «Il Barometro economico italiano», starting in 1929, and Niceforo was among the founders of Livi's Ccsp, the Consulting Committee for the Study of Population (Prévost 81, 87). In this context, Niceforo took Gini's place at the 1938 International Congress of Population in Paris – a crucial turning point even for the organization of eugenics in France – in order to allow the Ccsp to replace Gini's organization, the Cisp, on the international scene of the Iussp (International Union for the Scientific Study of Population) (Treves 2001, 222-223; Rosental 2003).

At the conference, Niceforo presented his major contribution to Italian fascist eugenics: the *graphic profile* (profilo grafico), which he had been elaborating since the beginning of the 1930s and was inspired by the German anthropologists Rudolf Martin and Theodor Mollison (Niceforo 1931; 1936; 1938a; 1938b)¹³. The *graphic profile* was not simply a means for the representation of data, but a technique whose

Fig. 2. 'Graphic profile' of three skulls on the grid of series of measurements of 50 skulls



Source: Niceforo (1936, 63).

aim was «to define the degree of normality or abnormality of several characters of a certain individual, without using the arithmetic average (like Martin and Mollison), without using subjective evaluations and with reference to the group of individuals to which he belongs» (Florian, Niceforo, Pende 1943, 725). What did ‘normality’ mean then according to Niceforo? Replacing Quetelet’s ‘average man’ with a ‘normal man’, as Niceforo made clear in *Che cosa è l’uomo “normale”?* (*What is the “normal” man?*), the ‘normal’ man he designed was characterized by the psychology of the conformist within his racial group (Niceforo 1938c).

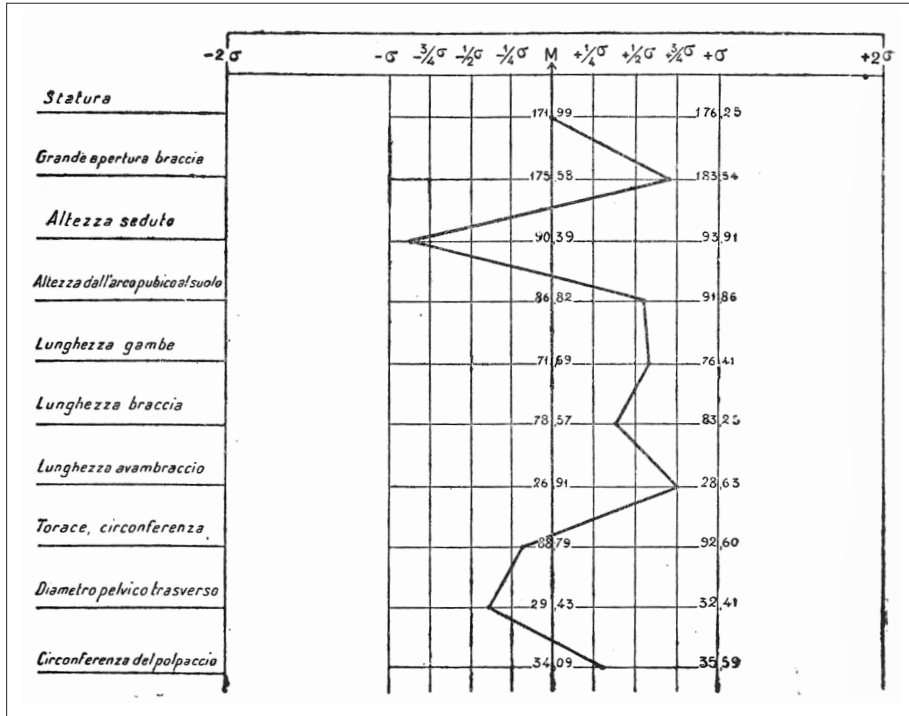
The structure of the *graphic profile* was constituted by the grid of the characters taken into account on the right and their measures in series of five classes on the top (fig. 2). The conjunction of the values for each individual (represented by a line) would produce automatically a ‘profile’ of the normality or abnormality of his characters, depending on the centrality of the line. The grid of series would eliminate the subjective judgment of the physician-criminologist and turned Lombroso’s abstract intuitions into a mechanic, ‘objective’, neutral and standardized practice.

More interestingly, the *graphic profile* could find any kind of application: criminals, madmen, workers in factories, even whole groups. The line on the grid could ‘reveal objectively’ abnormalities of any kind. In fact, the *graphic profile* was actually *producing* abnormality. A clear example of the racial underpinnings of Niceforo’s ‘neutral method’ was in the second edition of his textbook, *Il metodo statistico* (1931), where he compared the physical characters of white and black American soldiers. He borrowed the figures from the American eugenicist Charles Davenport (fig. 3). The line represented the irregularities of African-American soldiers on a normative grid representing the measures of white soldiers. Not just the topic of the example, but its very *design* took for granted the ‘normality’ of white people and the abnormality of people of color. In other words, the *graphic profile* intended to produce a mechanical distinction of physical and psychological characters from the organization of anthropometric measures and their statistical treatment, but it had selection biases built within its own model.

Niceforo’s idea of the *graphic profile* sprang from his identity as a scholar at the intersection between criminology, racial anthropology and statistics. For decades, Niceforo had envisioned statistics as a scientific, neutral, and standardized method that was useful to distinguish normal and pathological characters. In his view, the *graphic profile* could empirically help in the quantification of physical, biological and psychological data in order to easily determine superiorities and inferiorities of individuals and groups. Its statistics turned into visible figures differences in qualitative characteristics, such as intelligence, strength and health. In 1938, Niceforo claimed that the *graphic profile* was the best way to visualize the bio-constitutional types of «*brevilinei*» (short-statured) and «*longilinei*» (long-limbed) studied by the most important Italian eugenicist at that time: the endocrinologist Nicola Pende.

Pende was the major Italian scientist that contributed actively to the making of Italian eugenics for the fascist regime and was later involved in the racial debate ensuing the publication of the *Manifesto of Racial Scientists* (*Manifesto degli scienziati razzisti*) (Israel, Nastasi 1998; Maiocchi 1999). His constitutional bio-typology

Fig. 3. 'Graphic profile' of the proportions of black men's body (North American soldiers demobilized in 1919) compared with corresponding measures (on the grid) of white men (North American soldiers)



Source: Niceforo (1931, 333).

Note: Niceforo borrowed the data from Charles Davenport.

revealed individual internal development and racial psychology by studying the physical constitution of a subject. Rather than focusing on external racial markers as physical anthropologists and racial theorists of the previous century had done, he advocated for an analysis of internal and physiological characters, such as blood and 'constitution' that were affected by the environment and could explain human behavior as well. Niceforo was aware of Pende's work at least since 1926, when he mentioned him for the first time, but they collaborated to produce together the *Dictionary of Criminology* (*Dizionario di criminologia*) in 1943 (Florian, Niceforo, Pende 1943)¹⁴. Niceforo found that Pende's theory was useful for a statistical and biometrical analysis of individuals and their behavior.

Corrado Gini's reaction to Niceforo's replacement of his position at the 1938 International Conference of Population was furious. He tried to destroy Niceforo's *graphic profile* on the international scene with two articles on the «Revue internationale de Statistique», journal of the International Statistical Institute (Gini 1939). First, he argued that it was «impossible to understand how the author [Niceforo] can talk so often about the profile as if it was a method he had introduced» because

the same methodology had already been employed in anthropology and psychology (Gini 1939, 16). Similarly, he attacked Niceforo's students for talking about «*profils nicéforiens*», an unjustified name except for the fact that Niceforo was the only professor in statistics using such a method borrowed from anthropology and psychology. The *profile* – Gini remarked – had an absolutely arbitrary character, because the arrangement of the data demonstrated only the relationship between contiguous characters and not between all of them. In other words, «the defenders of the method of the profile [...] request from it not what it necessarily provides, but quite the contrary what it cannot offer» (Gini 1939, 24). Gini shattered Niceforo's claim of the mechanical objectivity of the profile by showing how the same data, arranged with the method of the profile and with other methods, would produce completely different results.

Gini made clear that the origins of the *graphic profile* were in anthropology, where the list of physical characters followed human physiognomy. He also exposed the absurdity of using the same methodology for psychological, economic and social characters as Niceforo and his school tried to do (Gini 1939, 237). Gini's vitriolic and destructive critique should not be interpreted just as a sign of personal antipathy or another additional episode of Gini's bad temper, but rather as a symptom of the tensions in the community of statisticians and demographers between 1937 and 1939. In addition to the opposition between Gini's Comitato italiano per lo studio dei problemi della popolazione (Cisp, Italian Committee for the Study of Population Problems) and Livi's Ccsp, Italian statisticians were splitting between the Società italiana di Demografia e Statistica (Sids) and Gini's Società di Statistica (Sis), the former closer to the demographic policies of the regime and the latter more abstract and formal (Prévost 2009, 89). Gini and Niceforo were clearly rivals at this time. It is quite an irony that Corrado Gini, the architect of Italy's demographic policies under fascism, became the foremost critic of Niceforo's approach to eugenics as contact zone between statistics, demography, anthropology and criminology. Such a mixture displayed its dangerous outcomes in the very same years with the making of the Italian racial laws and the *Manifesto of Racial Scientists* in 1938, when the regime tried to exploit the names of 'experts' from a wide range of disciplines in order to legitimize its change of racial policy. Gini's goal of further professionalizing the discipline exposed the controversial nature of Niceforo's quest for a statistical objectivity grounded in anthropological and criminological concerns.

5. Conclusions. Just a year before his death in 1960, Niceforo's name was praised publicly in New York City at the conference on the History of Quantification in the Sciences that took place on November 20-21, 1959. Among the major names gathered in that venue were Thomas Kuhn, Alexandre Koyré, Robert Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld. Lazarsfeld, Austrian émigré and prestigious sociologist at Columbia University, presented the paper *Notes on the History of Quantification in Sociology* (Lazarsfeld 1961). While describing the legacies of Quetelet's moral statistics, Lazarsfeld praised Niceforo, for his «most creative effort to give structure to the ever-increasing mass of data» from the end of the nineteenth century on, and for his role as «the earliest sociologist I found who used correlation coefficients explicitly»

(Lazarsfeld 1961, 311 and 332). Of course Lazarsfeld ignored that Niceforo had been not just a sociologist, but a founding father of Italian eugenics with a specific interest in statistics and criminal anthropology.

Niceforo's vision of eugenics connected Lombroso's criminal anthropology, Quetelet's demographic distribution of physical and intellectual characters in the bell curve, Pende's endocrinology and his Latin eugenics. Eventually, Niceforo designed his own methodology of the *graphic profile* leaning on physical anthropology and criminology. Niceforo definitely deserved Lazarsfeld's comment for his lifelong effort of quantifying a wide range of data from the most disparate realms of the natural and social world. Yet the eugenic motivations of his activity reveal the problematic features of his pursuit of 'objectivity' through a program of totalitarian quantification.

Throughout his intellectual trajectory, Niceforo presented statistics as a neutral, 'objective' and mechanic science. Yet, at a closer look his statistics tried to neutralize the controversial topic of race and the even more dubious connection between physical characters, intellectual capacities and criminal behavior. Niceforo's interest in race structured his approach to statistics from his earliest studies about the Italian South to his attempt of measuring the psychology of population groups. The evaluation of physical, intellectual, and psychological characteristics was just a step toward the bigger goal of establishing degrees of 'normality' and 'abnormality'. The visualization and quantification of data were crucial strategies to ascertain the reliability of anthropometric data and ground Niceforo's racial, criminological and demographic research on scientific bases.

Gini's intervention against Niceforo reveals that the professionalization of Italian statistics with the creation of the Sids and the Sis in the late 1930s was closing the intellectual space of Italian nineteenth century positivist eugenics, which had been fostered by the interaction between anthropology, criminology, statistics and sociology. As disciplinary barriers strengthened in the post-war period, Niceforo's activity was parceled into a number of different fields. Moreover, Gini's rejection of the *graphic profile* shows that Italian statisticians and demographers could share the same belief in eugenics and at the same time disagreed on their methods. Yet, by tracing the entire trajectory of his project of social observation, Niceforo's case reveals the composite and invisible nature of Italian positive eugenics, disguised in statistical textbooks, anthropological observations and demographic data.

¹ For the concept of scientific *persona*, see Steven Shapin (2008).

² See Niceforo (1897a and 1898b). These works were deeply shaped by Ferri and Sighele, in particular see Ferri (1896) and Sighele (1896).

³ Niceforo wrote articles on the «Avanti!» with the pseudonym Nix. I would like to thank Michele Nani for this piece of information.

⁴ Jean-Yves Frétygné (Frétygné 2002, 717, n. 446)

reports that Niceforo called him «dear master» («caro maestro»). The collaboration between Colajanni and Niceforo culminated in Niceforo's *Breve esposizione di qualche metodo per la elaborazione dei dati di una seriazione*, appendix to Colajanni (1914, 531-551).

⁵ Concerning Zuccarelli, see Mantovani (2004, 52-53).

⁶ As opposed to what Niceforo wrote in the

Ricerche sui contadini (1907), in a letter to Robert Michels concerning the German translation of the volume Niceforo wrote that the skulls did not come just from the village, but from several graves in the area around it. See fragment of letter in ASFE-1. I thank the personnel of the Fondazione Einaudi for providing the materials.

⁷ On Quetelet and the bell curve, see Gould (1981), Porter (1985; 1986).

⁸ In a lecture about inequality among people at La Sorbonne a few years later, Niceforo argued: «la présence d'une quantité d'hommes porteurs de caractères inférieurs dans la graduation physique et psychique est aussi un fait constant. ... nous nous flatons d'apporter dans toutes ces vues la précision de la mesure et des chiffres» (Niceforo 1919a, 170).

⁹ Letter from Alfredo Niceforo to Francesco Saverio Nitti in ACS-1, s.d. The underlined

words are in the original. Enrico Raseri was director of DirStat until July 1911, when he died. Luigi Luzzatti was Prime Minister between 1910 and 1911. Napoleone Colajanni was a sociologist and statistician from the University of Naples. Enrico Ferri was teaching at that time at the University of Rome.

¹⁰ See Niceforo 1916b, where he wrote that he had the chance of studying very closely sanitary statistics of war in France. For his work in the peace delegation, see Niceforo (1919).

¹¹ Gini reformed the Istat in 1926, while Niceforo was part of the Consiglio superiore di Statistica since 1924.

¹² Mollison had been the supervisor of Mengele's thesis.

¹³ To my knowledge, Niceforo mentioned Pende's school for the first time in his inquiry for the League of Nations (Niceforo, Pittard 1926).

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ACS Archivio centrale dello Stato, Roma
ASFE Fondazione Einaudi, Archivio storico, Torino

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ACS-1 ACS, *Corrispondenza Nitti*, b. 92, f. 744.

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ASFE-2 ASFE, *Fondo Nitti*, *Corrispondenza*.

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Summary

Eugenics as Social Observation: Anthropology, Statistics and the Pursuit of 'Objectivity' in Alfredo Niceforo's Thought (1876-1960)

In this article, I explore two crucial aspects in the history of Italian eugenics: the blending of disparate methodologies in the study of population and their essential contribution to the pursuit of scientific 'objectivity' at a time when disciplinary boundaries were far less rigid than today. In particular, I reflect on the role of the quantification and visualization of data in the making of eugenics as a neutral and 'objective' social science through the work of the statistician and demographer Alfredo Niceforo (1876-1960). I analyze three moments in Niceforo's intellectual biography: his studies about race and crime in Southern Italy at the end of the nineteenth century, his adoption of statistics at the beginning of the twentieth century, and his invention of the method of the "graphic profile" in the late 1930s. I interpret Niceforo's eugenics as a form of social scientific observation motivated by the transformation of Cesare Lombroso's school of criminology. Finally, I use Corrado Gini's critique of Niceforo's *graphic profile* to show that the blending of anthropology, criminology and statistics was crucial in Niceforo's multifaceted intellectual identity and a contested attempt to ground eugenics on a scientific basis.

Riassunto

L'eugenetica come scienza sociale: antropologia, statistica e la ricerca di 'oggettività' nel pensiero di Alfredo Niceforo (1876-1960)

Questo articolo esplora due aspetti cruciali nella storia dell'eugenetica italiana: la fusione di approcci diversi nello studio della popolazione e il loro contributo essenziale alla ricerca di 'oggettività' scientifica in un periodo in cui i confini disciplinari erano molto meno rigidi di oggi. In particolare, rifletto sul ruolo della quantificazione e visualizzazione di dati nel fare l'eugenetica come una scienza sociale neutra e 'oggettiva' attraverso il lavoro dello statistico e demografo Alfredo Niceforo (1876-1960). Analizzo tre momenti nella biografia intellettuale di Niceforo: i suoi studi su razza e crimine nell'Italia meridionale alla fine dell'Ottocento, il suo passaggio alla statistica all'inizio del Novecento e la sua invenzione del metodo del 'profilo grafico' alla fine degli anni Trenta. Interpreto l'eugenetica di Niceforo come una forma di scienza sociale le cui motivazioni originavano dalla trasformazione della scuola di criminologia di Cesare Lombroso. Infine, uso la critica di Corrado Gini al *profilo grafico* di Niceforo per mostrare che la fusione di antropologia, criminologia e statistica era cruciale nella sfaccettata identità intellettuale di Niceforo ed un tentativo contestato di fondare l'eugenetica su basi scientifiche.

Keywords

Niceforo; Statistics; Objectivity; Lombroso; Gini.

Parole chiave

Niceforo; Statistica; Oggettività; Lombroso; Gini.