
Renato Kehl and the eugenic radicalism in Brazil of the 1930s:
an analysis based on the work *Sexo e civilização: aparas
eugênicas* (1933)

Renato Kehl e o radicalismo eugênico no Brasil dos anos 1930:
uma análise a partir da obra *Sexo e civilização: aparas eugênicas*
(1933)

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Resumo

O objetivo deste artigo é analisar o radicalismo eugênico no Brasil dos anos 1930, com destaque para as ideias defendidas por Renato Kehl em seu livro *Sexo e civilização: aparas eugênicas*, publicado em 1933. Considerado a principal liderança do movimento eugênico brasileiro, Kehl também foi o eugenista que melhor sintetizou o extremismo das práticas eugênicas, caracterizado pela defesa de medidas violentas de segregação racial e controle da reprodução humana. Busco compreender especialmente o diálogo de Renato Kehl com as ideias e projetos intelectuais e políticos em jogo durante a década de 1930, atentando tanto para o contexto nacional quanto internacional. Neste sentido, analiso a publicação de *Sexo e civilização* como resultado dos diálogos e articulações de Kehl com a eugenia negativa de países como a Alemanha e Estados Unidos, ao mesmo tempo que coloco sua obra em perspectiva com os projetos e as ideologias em disputa durante o governo Vargas. Estes contextos são explorados a partir das discussões promovidas por Renato Kehl em torno de dois paradigmas centrais na história da eugenia: a esterilização eugênica e a miscigenação racial.

Palavras-Chave: Renato Kehl. Eugenia. Brasil. Esterilização Eugênica. Miscigenação Racial.

Abstract

This article aims to analyze eugenic radicalism in Brazil in the 1930s, emphasizing the ideas defended by Renato Kehl in his book *Sexo e civilização: aparas eugênicas*, published in 1933. Considered the main leader of the Brazilian

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Eugenic Movement, Kehl was also the eugenicist who best synthesized the extremism of eugenic practices, characterized by the defense of violent measures of racial segregation and control of human reproduction. I seek to understand Renato Kehl's dialogue with the ideas and intellectual and political projects at play during the 1930s, paying attention to both the national and international context. In this sense, I analyze the publication of *Sexo e civilização* as a result of Kehl's dialogues and articulations with the negative eugenics of countries such as Germany and the United States, at the same time that I place his work in perspective with the projects and ideologies in dispute during the Vargas government. These contexts are explored based on discussions promoted by Renato Kehl around two central paradigms in the history of eugenics: eugenic sterilization and racial miscegenation.

Keywords: Renato Kehl. Eugenics. Brazil. Eugenic Sterilization. Racial Miscegenation.

Introduction

“There is no solution to the social ills outside the laws of biology. There is no rational policy, independent of biological principles, capable of bringing peace and happiness to all peoples. Economic policy, conservative, democratic, socialist, fascist, communist, all these policies and forms of government *fail* if they are not inspired by the dictates of the science of life. That is why politics is per excellence biological politics, politics based on eugenics.”¹

The excerpt above was taken from the epigraph that Renato Kehl produced for his book *Sexo e civilização: aparas eugênicas*, published in 1933. The book presented a set of ideas that reaffirmed the Brazilian eugenicist's adherence to the biological-racial radicalism of the 1930s, characterized by the defense of negative eugenics. The epigraph can be read as a summary of the unwavering belief in eugenics as a way of solving the problems of modern nations. In Renato Kehl's opinion, no national state, government, or political regime, regardless of its ideological position, would be successful if it did not implement a truly biological policy, “a policy based on eugenics.” Politics itself, seen as a rational practice “capable of bringing peace and happiness to all peoples”, was confused with biological principles, since the control of social issues and the future of nations depended on the eugenic capacity of their population. Eugenics thus appeared as a biopolitics par excellence,

¹ KEHL, Renato. *Sexo e civilização: aparas eugênicas*. Rio de Janeiro: Livraria Francisco Alves, 1933.

according to the concept used by Michel Foucault to understand the meanings of managing the lives of populations in the era of modern governmentality².

The epigraph also pointed to the complex international context of the 1930s, marked by the ideological clash between democracy, liberalism, fascism, and communism. Despite the different projects that separated these regimes, Kehl understood that they would all fail if they did not adopt a strict eugenics policy. This statement also signaled the widespread use that both the reactionary right and liberals and the left and social democrats made of eugenics in the first decades of the 20th century, each in their way. As historian Mark Adams points out, eugenics was not just a reactionary movement of the extreme right, only associated with fascism, anti-Semitism, and American racial segregationism. According to the author, this understanding ended up overshadowing the uses that liberal intellectuals and politicians, communists, and left-wing activists made of eugenics in the first decades of the 20th century³. While it is true that the extreme right-wing regimes, especially in Nazi Germany, took eugenics to its ultimate consequences, we should not ignore the spread and use of eugenic ideas among German social democrats and socialists in the Weimar Republic, among communists in Stalin's Soviet Union, or even among doctors and intellectuals. The spread and use of eugenic ideas among German social democrats and socialists in the Weimar Republic, among communists in Stalin's Soviet Union, in Scandinavian social democracies, among English and American feminists, or even among doctors and intellectuals who supported the Mexican Revolution⁴.

In the case of Renato Kehl, it is important to say that his ideas and eugenic projects were in line with the reactionary regimes on the right of the political spectrum. It is no coincidence that his model of eugenics conversed with both American eugenicists and supremacists, as well as eugenicists associated with Nazism and German Aryanism. Kehl even went so far as to enthusiastically praise the eugenics policies implemented during the Third Reich, which he saw as an example that should be followed in the rest of the world⁵. One of the aims of this article is precisely to demonstrate that

² FOUCAULT, Michel. The right to die and power over life. In: _____. *A história da sexualidade: a vontade de saber*. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Graal, 1997, p.125-149.

³ ADAMS, Mark B. (Org.). *The wellborn science: eugenics in Germany, France, Brazil and Russia*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 219-220.

⁴ ADAMS, op. cit., 1990; STERN, Alexandra. *Eugenic nation: faults and frontier of better breeding in modern America*. California: University of California Press, 2005; STEPAN, Nancy. *A hora da eugenia: raça, gênero e nação na América Latina*. Rio de Janeiro: Fiocruz, 2005.

⁵ KEHL, Renato. "Devem ser esterilizados os enfermos incuráveis? (Inquérito entre os cientistas

the book *Sexo e civilização: aparas eugênicas* is the result of a dialog with the German and American eugenics movements, especially regarding adherence to negative eugenics, seen as a more draconian model of eugenic measures. The very desire to employ eugenics as a “biological policy” was in tune with the Nazi obsession with designing the regime’s political architecture from the biological and racial body of the nation⁶.

At the same time, this article aims to analyze Renato Kehl’s book as a response to the internal Brazilian context, marked by heated discussions about the racial question and the future formation of the Brazilian population. This period was experiencing the effects of the so-called “Revolution of 1930” and the rise to the presidency of Getúlio Vargas, a rancher from Rio Grande do Sul who had come to power after a troubled political coup. The first years of his government were marked by strong political instability and a crisis of legitimacy, which served as justification for the formation of an increasingly authoritarian and centralizing government, identified with European fascism and with an anti-communist bias⁷. On the other hand, the Vargas government was characterized by an aggressive nationalist policy, which further fueled discussions about immigration control, the occupation of the interior of the country, racial identity, as well as the future formation of the Brazilian man, topics that eugenicists wanted to intervene in directly.

In this article, I also try to point out that Renato Kehl’s actions in the early 1930s, including the publication of the book *Sexo e civilização: aparas eugênicas*, should be seen as strategies to occupy space in the country’s political and intellectual debate. At the same time, the article also highlights Renato Kehl’s movement to bring eugenics in Brazil into line with the intervention proposals circulating in the United States, Germany, and other northern European countries whose eugenics movements had been more successful in implementing eugenics as a state policy. This gave eugenicists the legitimacy to transform eugenics into a political tool, as an inescapable instrument for perfecting the “national race” and placing Brazil in the concert of eugenic nations.

brasileiros)”. *O Globo*. Rio de Janeiro. 3 Jan. 1934.

⁶ PROCTOR, Robert. *Racial hygiene: medicine under the Nazis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988; WEISS, Sheila Faith. The Race Hygiene Movement In Germany 1904-1945. In: ADAMS, Mark (Org.). *The wellborn science: eugenics in Germany, France, Brazil and Russia*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 8-68, 1990.

⁷ FAUSTO, Boris. *A história do Brasil*. São Paulo: Edusp, 2019; FERREIRA, Jorge; DELGADO, Lucília de Almeida Neves. *O tempo do nacional estatismo – vol. 2: do início da década de 1930 ao apogeu do Estado Novo*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2019.

Renato Kehl and the eugenic radicalism of the 1930s

In 1933, when he published *Sexo e civilização*, Renato Kehl was already a prestigious author in intellectual circles, especially in the medical field, seen as the great leader of the Brazilian eugenics movement. The writer Monteiro Lobato, with whom he had a very close relationship, considered him the “father of eugenics” in Brazil, such was the recognition of his efforts to promote and institutionalize eugenic science⁸. Born in the interior of São Paulo, a son of German descendants who were already well established in Brazil, Kehl graduated from the Faculty of Medicine of Rio de Janeiro in 1915, when he became interested in the work of Francis Galton, British mathematician and naturalist who created eugenics as the science of racial improvement. Since then, his career has been intertwined with the history of the eugenics movement in Brazil⁹. In 1918, when he was already living in São Paulo, he led the creation of the Eugenics Society of São Paulo, an organization that had more than 140 members. A few years later, when he returned to Rio de Janeiro to take up the post of Sanitary Director of the National Department of Public Health (DNSP), he joined the Brazilian Mental Hygiene League, an institution that played an important and ongoing role in spreading eugenics among Brazilian doctors and psychiatrists.

At the end of the 1920s, when eugenics had become common parlance among intellectuals, Renato Kehl created the *Boletim de Eugenia*, a monthly periodical that circulated between 1929 and 1933. The periodical played an important role not only in spreading eugenic ideas but also in rallying the movement’s supporters around Kehl’s leadership. As a result of the growing interest in eugenics, the First Brazilian Congress of Eugenics was held in 1929, in which Kehl took part as one of the organizers. By this time, Kehl had already distanced himself from the health movement, which he had joined 10 years earlier, and joined the radical eugenics movement that would mark his career from the late 1920s onwards. This rupture became more evident with the release of the book *Lições de Eugenia*, published in 1929¹⁰. The work established

⁸ Letter from Monteiro Lobato to Renato Kehl. São Paulo, (No date) - Renato Kehl Personal Fund. Department of Archives and Documentation of the Casa de Oswaldo Cruz, DAD-COC. In the same correspondence, Monteiro Lobato apologized for having dedicated his “O choque de raças” (The Black President) to Renato Kehl, a book that Lobato defined as a “pro-eugenics war cry”. At the end of the letter, as a way of expressing his identification with Kehl and the theme of eugenics, he wrote: “We need to launch, to vulgarize these ideas. Humanity needs only one thing: pruning. It is like a vineyard.

⁹ SOUZA, Vanderlei Sebastião de. *Renato Kehl e a eugenia no Brasil: ciência, raça e nação no entreguerras*. Guarapuava: Eduni, 2019.

¹⁰ KEHL, Renato. *Lições de eugenia*. Rio de Janeiro: Francisco Alves, 1929a.

a closer conversation with Mendelian eugenics practiced in the United States and Germany, which guided harsher measures of eugenic intervention, such as racial segregation, eugenic sterilization, and marriage control¹¹. Launched during the First Brazilian Congress of Eugenics, the book was harshly criticized by anthropologists Edgar Roquette-Pinto and Alvaro Fróes da Fonseca, who classified the work as a pseudoscience, a set of Aryanist ideologies that were not supported by “modern” anthropological studies¹².

Criticisms of Renato Kehl’s book point to a clear division that would gain even more strength in the intellectual and scientific field in the 1930s. Due to the ideological radicalization in the early years of the Vargas government, the generation of intellectuals formed during the First Republic period was strongly mobilized by the challenge of understanding Brazilian society, its culture, and its political life. Intending to intervene in government discussions and guide the debate on the country’s modernization, these intellectuals constructed different interpretations and diagnoses of Brazil and Brazilians, the reasons for economic and civilizational backwardness, the role of the state and its institutions, racial composition and national identity, among other topics considered key to the country’s development and civilization, the role of the state and its institutions, racial composition, and national identity, among other issues considered key to the country’s development¹³.

It was precisely in the 1930s that essays with profound historical and sociological reflections on Brazil and Brazilian society appeared, works that would become classics of social and intellectual thought. In the artistic and cultural field, modernism also emerged in this context as a critical power capable of transforming art and literature into works of interpretation and denunciation of Brazilian “problems”. Among them, we can highlight authors such as Jorge Amado, Graciliano Ramos, Cecília Meireles, José Lins do Rego, Rachael de Queiroz, and Érico Veríssimo, among other writers who had in common a strong engagement with political and social issues¹⁴.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Texts by Roquette-Pinto and Alvaro Fróes da Fonseca can be consulted in the Proceedings of the First Brazilian Congress of Eugenics. PROCEEDINGS OF THE EUGENICS CONGRESS. In: *Actas e Trabalhos do Primeiro Congresso Brasileiro de Eugenia*. Rio de Janeiro, vol. I, 1929, p. 11-42. For more details on Roquette-Pinto and Fróes da Fonseca’s clashes with Renato Kehl, see SOUZA, Vanderlei Sebastião de. *Em busca do Brasil: Edgar Roquette-Pinto e o retrato antropológico brasileiro (1905-1935)*. Rio de Janeiro: Fiocruz; FGV Editora, 2017.

¹³ SCHWARCZ, Lília Moritz. *O espetáculo das raças: cientistas, instituições e questão racial no Brasil*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1993; STEPAN, op. cit., 2005.

¹⁴ ROSSI, Luiz Gustavo Freitas. *As cores da revolução: a literatura de Jorge Amado nos anos 30*. São Paulo: Annablume, 2009; BUENO, Luís. *Uma história do romance de 30*. São Paulo: Edusp, 2006.

These works pointed to different interpretations of the viability of Brazil and Brazilians on the international stage, especially when considering the country's racial background, which was strongly marked by miscegenation. On the one hand, there were intellectuals, such as Oliveira Vianna, Monteiro Lobato, and Renato Kehl, who projected rather pessimistic readings and diagnoses of Brazilian racial formation, almost always informed by theories and concepts originating from scientific racism. For them, Brazil's great dilemma, the reason for the nation's "ills", was a "race issue". It was on this aspect that intellectuals, science, the state, and its institutions had to act, promoting policies of racial and social selection according to eugenic principles¹⁵. On the other hand, intellectuals linked to the field of emerging social sciences, including Roquette-Pinto, Arthur Ramos, and Gilberto Freyre, promoted more optimistic interpretations of Brazilian racial identity, refuting scientific racism and stigmas about miscegenation. In the view of this generation, the country's problems were not related to race or racial mixing, but to historical and sociological problems, linked to the slave-owning past, public health problems, illiteracy, and political disorganization, in line with the perspective that had already been built up during the First Republic¹⁶.

It was in this intellectual and political context that Renato Kehl projected himself as a prominent eugenicist. Despite the bluntness of the criticism directed at him during the First Brazilian Eugenics Congress, his reputation seems not to have been shaken, as he continued to lead the eugenics movement with great enthusiasm. As well as tirelessly promoting eugenic ideas in the press and on the pages of the *Boletim de Eugenia*, he led a group of eugenicists around the creation of the Central Brazilian Commission of Eugenics (CCBE) in 1931, an organization that aimed to "maintain interest in the study of heredity and eugenics in the country"¹⁷. In essence, the commission had been set up in an interest in occupying a space with the Vargas government, advising on government eugenics policy projects, as Kehl himself had pointed out in the pages of the *Boletim de Eugenia*. At the same time, Kehl recalled that the Commission was the result of "intense correspondence with the main associations that exist in Europe and North America", and

¹⁵ SCHWARCZ, op. cit., 1993; SOUZA, op. cit., 2017.

¹⁶ LIMA, Nísia Trindade; HOCHMAN, Gilberto. "Condenado pela raça, absolvido pela medicina: o Brasil descoberto pelo movimento sanitário da Primeira República". In: MAIO, Marcos Chor; SANTOS, Ricardo Ventura (Org.). *Raça, ciência e sociedade*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Fiocruz, 1996, p. 23-40.

¹⁷ KEHL, op. cit., 1933, p. 263.

was affiliated with the International Federation of Eugenics Associations¹⁸. Among the members of the Commission was none other than Belisário Penna, Renato Kehl's father-in-law and then Minister of the newly created Ministry of Education and Public Health, seen as a figure who could bring the Vargas government closer to the eugenics movement¹⁹.

The debate on eugenics seemed to have reached its peak at this point in the 1930s. Not by chance, Kehl wrote in 1933 that “the present era is the era of eugenics”, in a reference to the success of eugenics in different countries around the world²⁰. In the case of Brazil, in addition to a well-established institutional network, eugenic ideas were becoming recurrent discussions, as if eugenics' time had come. An example of this could be seen in the debate that the Constituent Assembly of 1933-34 promoted around immigration policy, the application of prenuptial exams, and the inclusion of eugenics education in Brazilian schools. The issue of immigration policy was undoubtedly the one that gave eugenicists the greatest visibility. In the sessions in which the legislation project was discussed, eugenicists were quoted and consulted quite frequently, which contributed to the approval of strict legislation around immigration control²¹. Renato Kehl's name was also recurrently mentioned in parliamentary speeches, as he had also been appointed by the Vargas government to sit on a commission that drew up the pre-project regulating the flow of immigrants. This commission was chaired by none other than Oliveira Vianna, an intellectual well-known for his relations with the eugenics movement and his publications on the Brazilian racial issue²².

In the face of this scenario, Renato Kehl doubled down on his radical eugenics, taking on an agenda increasingly identified with restrictive measures on human reproduction and racial selection. In his view, every effort should be made to prevent the reproduction of individuals considered undesirable. It was in this context, and with this racist perspective, that Renato Kehl published the book *Sexo e civilização: aparas eugênicas*. The work expressed not only the extremism of his ideas but also a convinced optimism about

¹⁸ KEHL, Renato. “Porque se fundou a C.C.B.E”. *Boletim de Eugenia*. Rio de Janeiro, mar 1931, ano III, n. 27, p. 2.

¹⁹ On Belisário Penna's career, his relationship with the Vargas government and his involvement with the eugenics movement, see CARVALHO, Leonardo Dallacqua. *O saneador do Brasil: saúde pública, política e integralismo na trajetória de Belisário Penna (1868-1939)*. Tese (Doutorado em História das Ciências) — Casa de Oswaldo Cruz/Fiocruz, Rio de Janeiro, 2019.

²⁰ KEHL, op. cit., 1933, p. 11.

²¹ PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY. *Imprensa Nacional*. Rio de Janeiro, 22 volumes, 1935. Available: <https://bd.camara.leg.br/bd/discover>; accessed: March 10, 2024.

²² SOUZA, op. cit., 2017.

the uses that governments in different countries were making of eugenics, especially in northern Europe. With the collapse of liberalism, Kehl seemed to celebrate the rise of fascism, nationalism, and authoritarian regimes, which were increasingly willing to carry out biological policy as a state project. In the introductory pages to the 1933 book, he pointed out that the present time was an era of “revolutionary transformations”, marked by “a lively ferment of ideas and the violent realization of new facts”²³. In his view, everything was changing overnight, as if modernity had finally found its way. Nations were springing up with force, posing “new problems” and creating doctrines that, in his words, were putting down “deep roots in public opinion”. He celebrated the fact that eugenics was among these doctrines, “the doctrine of regenerating man within the norms of biology”²⁴.

His recent book even seemed to point to events taking place in Europe, especially in Germany, which was then celebrating the rise of Nazism. Renato Kehl’s references to Germany are quite recurrent in this period, even praising the very racial tribunal set up by Adolf Hitler’s government. In his opinion, Germany was the country that best addressed the eugenics issue, seen as a decisive instrument for strengthening the nation²⁵. On the other hand, as he pointed out in his 1933 book, eugenicists doubted universal suffrage and democracy, since they tended to level individuals and undermine the influence of the elites, the only group that would be able to govern. Democratic government was summed up as a government of “mediocre men”, or “inferior men”. Quoting the writer Madison Grant, one of the greatest defenders of Aryan supremacy in the United States, he recalled that “the true republic is governed by the fittest, the best, always represented by a small minority of the population”²⁶.

One of the arguments of this work is that Renato Kehl’s identification with authoritarian regimes and eugenic radicalism is directly linked to the close contact he had with Germany. Since the late 1920s, when he became director of Bayer in Brazil, a German multinational with roots in several countries, Kehl had built a direct connection with the company’s headquarters in Germany. This contact also enabled frequent trips to that country, some of them with extended stays, which allowed time for study, and personal contact

²³ KEHL, op. cit., 1933, p. 9.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 10.

²⁵ KEHL, op. cit., 1934.

²⁶ KEHL, op. cit., 1933, p. 39.

with eugenicists and eugenic associations in Germany, Sweden, Denmark, and Norway. His first trip to Germany was in 1928 when he spent five months traveling around northern Europe. This trip would have stimulated him to expand the dissemination of eugenics in Brazil, as could be seen from the launch of the *Boletim de Eugenia* three months after his return to Brazil. In the second issue of the journal, Kehl highlighted the need to create a Brazilian Institute of Eugenics in Brazil, allowing for “the new era in which Brazilian nationality will be taken care of, as the Berlin Institute of Eugenics does for German nationality”²⁷. In addition, the book *Lições de eugenia* (Lessons in Eugenics), published in June 1929, not only intended to teach the lessons in eugenics that he had learned in Germany but also pointed to the process of radicalizing his eugenics project. His contact with eugenics in that country had even brought him closer to Mendelian genetics, as he had confessed in correspondence with Toledo de Piza Junior, a geneticist at the Luiz de Queiroz Agricultural School and one of the main authorities on Brazilian genetics²⁸.

The book *Sexo and Civilização* should also be read as the result of Kehl’s second trip to Germany. At this time, the Nazis had already come to power and the German eugenics court was beginning to be set up, led by eugenicists who had spearheaded the eugenics movement during the Weimar Republic. Although German eugenics was a much more heterogeneous movement than is generally imagined before Nazism, as historian Sheila Weiss explains, there was a more extremist group identified with the ideologies of Aryan supremacy from the beginning of the 20th century. For them, the power of a nation was essentially a question of racial policy, which meant encouraging the reproduction of the descendants of the “Aryan race” and preventing the reproduction of undesirables, seen as “inferior races”. The German Eugenics Court itself, so praised by Renato Kehl, had the function of rigid racial selection, using policies of marriage control, sterilization, and compulsory hospitalization of the mentally ill, the application of euthanasia, if not mass elimination, as occurred at the end of the Nazi government²⁹.

²⁷ KEHL, Renato. “Instituto Brasileiro de Eugenia”. *Boletim de Eugenia*, Rio de Janeiro, Feb. 1929b, vol. 1, n. 2, p. 1.

²⁸ There are two pieces of correspondence in which Renato Kehl discusses the book *Lições de Eugenia* with Salvador Toledo Piza Junior, especially issues about Mendelian theory. Letter from Renato Kehl to Salvador Toledo Piza Junior. Rio de Janeiro, March 24, 1930; Letter from Renato Kehl to Salvador Toledo Piza Junior. Rio de Janeiro, August 19, 1930 (Fundo Pessoal Renato Kehl. Department of Archives and Documentation of the Casa de Oswaldo Cruz (DAD-COC).

²⁹ PROCTOR, op. cit., 1988; WEISS, op. cit., 1990.

Eugenic sterilization and control of human reproduction

There is no doubt that Renato Kehl was infected by the growing eugenic radicalism of countries like Germany, Norway, Denmark, and Sweden, or even English-speaking countries like the United States and England. It was through dialog with the eugenics movements in these countries that his eugenics project gained strength in the 1930s. In this respect, we differ from historian Nancy Stepan, who includes the eugenics model defended by Renato Kehl as part of the “Latin eugenics” paradigm, linked to the neo-Lamarckist tradition³⁰. In general terms, “Latin eugenics” was characterized by its association with hygiene and environmental reforms, maternal and child care, and sex education, seen as a “softer” model of eugenic intervention. Although the neo-Lamarckist theses were present in Renato Kehl’s early writings, he not only adhered to the Mendelian theses from the late 1920s onwards but also began to refute the theories on the inheritance of acquired characters. It is no coincidence that his 1933 book made a clear case for controlling human reproduction by imposing tougher measures associated with Mendelian theories³¹, as was being implemented in the Nordic countries.

As we will see below, *Sexo e civilização: aparas eugênicas* (Sex and civilization: eugenic trimmings), as its title suggests, had the main objective of promoting a debate on human reproduction based on the conceptions derived from Mendel’s laws of heredity. At least three chapters of the book are dedicated precisely to thinking about the theoretical aspects related to the foundations of eugenics, explicitly connected to the paradigms of Mendelian evolutionism. To carry out the “eugenic trimmings” and prevent the reproduction of undesirables, Kehl advocated the development of studies on the foundations of human heredity, seen as essential for supposed racial improvement and the fight against the factors responsible for human degeneration. It can be said that the book revolves around three main axes: the theoretical aspects involving eugenics and Mendelian genetics; the relations of eugenics with sexuality, marriages, and human reproduction; and the relations between miscegenation, degeneration, and racial selection.

³⁰ STEPAN, op. cit. 2005.

³¹ For Mendelian eugenicists, hereditary characteristics could only be transmitted from father to son through sexual reproduction, without any interference from environmental conditions. Renato Kehl’s famous phrase “the good are born ready” summed up the spirit of Mendelian eugenics. Although it was not a rule, many Mendelian eugenicists believed that only harsher measures stemming from negative eugenics, such as those that prevented the reproduction of undesirables, would have a practical effect on the process of improving future generations. KEHL, Renato. “Aparas médicas: a felicidade do ponto de vista médico e eugênico”. *Correio da Manhã*. Rio de Janeiro, August 30, 1930.

In the first two chapters of the book, Renato Kehl turns to the discussion of human degeneration, a theme that has haunted doctors, intellectuals, and public authorities since the 19th century, especially in Europe. With the growing urban and industrial process, it was feared that contact with poverty and proximity to the poor would hinder the process of natural selection, leading European civilization to moral and biological decadence. In addition, with the imperialist race underway, there was a fear that frequent contact between Europe and its colonies in the southern hemisphere, and the consequent interbreeding with so-called inferior peoples, would threaten Europe's supposed racial purity. This was already a central concern when Galton produced his first reflections on eugenics. From the beginning of the 20th century, this concern gained even more strength among eugenicists, whether due to the effects of the expansion of immigration and miscegenation, or the consequences of the First World War, which produced a mass of poor, sick, and mutilated war victims³².

Renato Kehl analyzes the process of human degeneration based on statistics collected in various countries and from the point of view of different European and North American eugenicists, including figures such as the Aryanist Madison Grant, author of *Passing of the Great Race*, one of the most influential works in the history of scientific racism³³. From these readings, Kehl concludes that human degeneration is an effect of the imbalances produced by modernity itself, between the rapid "growth of human scum", which he defined as the "multiplication of delinquents, amorals, imbeciles, madmen, and mentally retarded people", and the reduction of the "good part of the collectivity", the individuals of "good breeding"³⁴.

In the case of Brazil, Kehl presents an even more pessimistic scenario, as a series of Brazilian writers would have shown, referring to authors such as Nina Rodrigues, Oliveira Vianna, and Paulo Prado, intellectuals whose reflections are recognizably crossed by scientific racism. The Brazilian eugenicist goes so far as to ask, repeating the words of Paulo Prado, if the "extent of the evils that afflict us" is not "a consequence of the mixing of races?"³⁵. Kehl's answer is positive. According to him, in addition to the lack

³² KEVLES, Daniel. *In the name of eugenics: genetics and the uses of human heredity*. New York: Knopf, 1985. ADAMS, op. cit. 1990.

³³ BARKAN, Elazar. *The retreat of scientific racism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

³⁴ KEHL, op. cit., 1933, p. 15-16.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 19.

of natural selection caused by the forces of modernity, the “decadence of peoples” comes from “heterogeneous crossbreeding”, as is the case in Brazil³⁶.

The biggest dilemma for eugenicists was not that societies were degenerating rapidly, but that degenerate individuals would never produce “healthy offspring” fit for civilization. In Kehl’s view, degenerate parents would beget children who were also degenerate, mentally ill, criminals, delinquents, or incapable, most of them “incurable or incorrigible”³⁷. For Kehl, the determinism of biology taught that man is “a slave to his nature”, a prisoner of heredity, of “a force that inexorably subjugates him biologically, that imprints his temperament, his character”³⁸. This reality forced Kehl to conclude that there is nothing outside of biology. Education, religion, or any form of social policy would not be enough to regenerate humanity or make it more balanced. In many cases, education and the social environment serve only to “provide life resources and to encourage the procreation of undesirables for the species”³⁹. He concluded: “As long as the problem of human degeneration is not viewed from a biological point of view, we will always have to encounter bad social and individual clashes, crises, and threats to the peace of family, society, and between nations.”⁴⁰.

In the face of this scenario, Renato Kehl believed that only the application of restrictive measures would enable the consideration of racial improvement for future generations. It would be up to the state to not only encourage the reproduction of families of “good pedigree”, but also to prevent the reproduction of those supposed to be degenerate or inferior. He also believed that all countries should invest in “rational procreation”, even if this meant implementing a strict *birth control* policy, called birth control, using not only prenuptial examinations and marriage regulations but also harsher measures such as eugenic sterilization, as the United States and northern European countries were already doing. In his opinion, *birth control* was recommended as “an ultra-prophylactic measure against the plethora of mentally deficient people, human waste, and also as a defense for eugenicized couples”⁴¹.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 44.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 41.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 14.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 46.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 15.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 198-199.

Birth control thus appears as one of the issues that most occupied Renato Kehl's attention in his book *Sexo e civilização: aparas eugênicas*. One of the most efficient ways of controlling the eugenic value of a nation was to improve birth control, whether through the practices of sex education and marriage guidance, or harsher measures of sterilization and racial segregation. For many Brazilian eugenicists, marriage guidance practices were ways of carrying out "negative eugenics" in a less radical way, without the need for sterilizing surgeries. In this case, it is understandable that even marriage counseling and female sex education were part of a restrictive reproductive policy, seen as efficient birth control measures⁴². It is no coincidence that Renato Kehl himself published a book in 1925 entitled *Como escolher um bom marido* (How to choose a good husband)⁴³, in which he advised young women on the importance of marriage and the role of female sexual and marital education in the eugenic formation of future generations.

Nancy Stepan points out that this relationship between race and gender was a common concern among eugenicists in the 1920s and 1930s, incorporated as an increasingly central aspect in discourses about the nation. As the social role of women was seen as primarily reproductive, it was women who bore the greatest responsibility for giving birth to healthy offspring. Nancy Stepan goes on to explain that "the desire to 'imagine' the nation in biological terms, to 'purify' the reproduction of populations in order to adapt them to hereditary norms" placed eugenics, race, and gender as aspects closely connected to the very debate on national identity politics⁴⁴. In this context, gender was one of the issues on the agenda of eugenicists and public authorities, above all because eugenics enabled the maintenance of control over female sexuality as well as over the reproductive and maternal role of women. At the same time, historiography has highlighted that more progressive eugenicists, or even women's rights activists, also saw eugenics as a possibility for debating the emancipation of women. For this group, eugenics stimulated female sex education and made it possible to think about the use of contraceptive methods, the debate on divorce, and even the right to abortion, issues that the feminist movement was facing at the time⁴⁵.

⁴² STEPAN, op. cit., 2005, p. 116.

⁴³ KEHL, Renato. *Como escolher um bom marido*. Rio de Janeiro: Livraria Francisco Alves, 1925.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

⁴⁵ KEVLES, op. cit., 1985; STEPAN, op. cit., 2005.

With regard to prenuptial exams, Renato Kehl believed that making them compulsory was an effective eugenic policy measure. This explains why eugenicists lobbied for the measure to be approved by the 1933-34 Constituent Assembly, with Kehl at the forefront of this movement. The final result ended up frustrating the expectations of the most radical eugenicists since the constituent assembly only recommended that prenuptial exams be carried out, without the weight of the obligation so desired by the eugenics movement. In Kehl's opinion, all couples should undergo mandatory examinations before getting married, including a thorough analysis of their family history up to the third degree. In the event of any risk to future generations, couples should be prevented from marrying, or submit themselves to sterilization surgery⁴⁶. For the eugenicist, the restriction on marriage should also be indicated in cases involving people of different classes or races, especially "with mestizos of the first generations". According to him, "it has been proven that such marriages are dysgenic, giving rise to physically, psychically and morally inferior types"⁴⁷. In these cases, Kehl also recommended eugenic sterilization.

The idea of sterilization as a way of controlling human reproduction was discussed at length by Kehl in his 1933 book. Although he had already defended sterilization in specific cases in the 1920s, according to an article published in the *Archivos Brasileiros de Hygiene Mental*⁴⁸ In the early 1930s, Kehl not only intensified his campaign to defend this measure but also broadened his understanding of the cases in which it should be indicated. It can be said that Kehl was mobilized by the broad debate that eugenicists were having in the 1930s around negative eugenics programs. It was precisely during this period that human sterilization had become a central theme for eugenicists, seen as one of the most necessary measures in controlling reproduction. Nancy Stepan argues that the introduction of discussions on sterilization was by far "the most dramatic change in the traditional norms that regulated the Western family and individual rights to reproduction"⁴⁹. Examples of this were the thousands of people compulsorily sterilized in the United States between 1907 and 1970, as well as the most violent cases in Germany during the Nazi government.

⁴⁶ KEHL, op. cit., 1933, p. 84-85.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 85.

⁴⁸ KEHL, Renato. "A esterilização dos grandes degenerados e criminosos". *Archivos Brasileiros de Hygiene Mental*, n.1, v.2, 1925.

⁴⁹ STEPAN, op. cit., 2005, p. 37.

In the pages of *Sexo e civilização*, Renato Kehl welcomed the fact that some European countries were looking enthusiastically at the recent passing of laws regulating sterilization, especially in Germany, Sweden, Denmark, and Switzerland⁵⁰. However, what caught the Brazilian eugenicist's attention was the sterilization laws underway in the United States, a country that had been carrying out sterilization surgeries as a measure to control human reproduction since 1907. Kehl looked more closely at the initiatives made by eugenicists Harry Laughlin, Ezra Gosney, and Paul Popenoe, eugenicists who led a series of campaigns in defense of *Birth Control* in the state of California, especially compulsory sterilization. In 1928, Gosney and Popenoe founded the *Human Betterment Foundation*, an institution focused on research into human reproduction and the role of sterilization for eugenic purposes⁵¹. In addition to translating articles by these authors for the *Eugenics Bulletin*, Kehl even corresponded with these eugenicists, through which they exchanged institutional information, research interests, and bibliographic material on their medical and scientific productions.

In his 1933 book, Kehl showed great enthusiasm for the benefits of sterilization, from which “the best results are expected”. In his opinion, if this measure “had been enacted by law earlier, its beneficial effects could already be assessed today”, so “it is necessary to look at the racial problem with a broad eugenic view [...] to understand the true usefulness of sterilization”⁵². Kehl argued that such a restrictive measure should be applied in different cases, from the mentally ill, the physically handicapped, criminals, or those with hereditary diseases, to cases in which the poor were unable to economically support their offspring. In his words, this “human waste” was “the cause of the misery, the misfortune of so many families, in whose midst degenerates of all kinds, cretins, idiots, criminals, scoundrels, drunks, and all manner of undesirables breed”⁵³.

In the case of Brazil, although the government never officially legislated on eugenic sterilization, there was a strong desire among eugenicists to regulate this measure. In addition to Renato Kehl's efforts, eugenicists associated with the Brazilian League for Mental Hygiene, including Alberto Farani, Pacheco e Silva, Cunha Lopes, and Ernani Lopes also campaigned

⁵⁰ KEHL, op. cit., 1933, p. 188.

⁵¹ STERN, op. cit., 2005, p. 158-159.

⁵² KEHL, op. cit., 1933, p. 71.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 190.

extensively for sterilization. Like Kehl, they believed that the regulation of this measure in Brazil was only a matter of time.

When the law on compulsory sterilization was passed in Germany by the Nazi government in 1933, these eugenicists welcomed the law with enthusiasm, even publishing it in full in the pages of the *Archivos Brasileiros de Hygiene Mental*⁵⁴. The sterilization law put into practice by Adolf Hitler's government was also covered by the major newspapers of the time, as can be seen in the survey that the newspaper *O Globo* carried out in January 1934 among Brazilian eugenicists. The interviews were also the newspaper's cover story, with one interview a day. Renato Kehl was one of those interviewed, expressing great enthusiasm for the sterilization measure passed in Germany. Others who also spoke in defense of the measure were Pacheco e Silva, Oscar Fontenelle, and Leonídio Ribeiro. Only two interviewees were against or made restrictions on its implementation: the anthropologist Edgard Roquette-Pinto and the doctor Leitão da Cunha, the latter a professor at the Faculty of Medicine in Rio de Janeiro and also a member of the 1933-34 Constituent Assembly⁵⁵.

In his interview with *O Globo*, which was the first in the series and took up the entire front page of the newspaper, Renato Kehl recalled that his opinion was already well known, referring to the lengthy treatment he had dedicated to this subject in his book *Sexo e civilização*, "which I have now published, following my recent trip to the north of the European continent"⁵⁶. By highlighting the publication of his book and his recent trip to Germany, when Nazism had already taken power, Kehl lent credentials that reaffirmed his notorious knowledge of the subject. So much so that he made a point of emphasizing that his opinion in favor of sterilization was "based on the study and observation of many years, an opinion that I believe to be definitive". Kehl not only praised the "judicious law" passed in Germany, a country that, according to him, was taking things seriously, but also pointed out that other countries were already applying this measure. When asked about the possibility of implementing a similar law in Brazil, he was convinced: "Despite

⁵⁴ "A lei alemã de esterilização dos doentes transmissores de taras". *Archivos Brasileiros de Hygiene Mental*, Rio de Janeiro, v.7, n.1. 1934. On the publication of this law in Brazil, see: WEGNER, Robert; SOUZA, Vanderlei Sebastião de. "Eugenia 'negativa', psiquiatria e catolicismo: embates em torno da esterilização eugênica no Brasil". *História, Ciência, Saúde-Manguinhos*, 2013, v. 20, n. 1, p. 263-288.

⁵⁵ O GLOBO. "Devem ser esterilizados os enfermos incuráveis? Inquérito entre os cientistas brasileiros". *O Globo*. Rio de Janeiro, Jan. 1934.

⁵⁶ KEHL, op. cit., 1934.

the routine and the fetishists, sterilization will become a reality in Brazil, in the future”⁵⁷.

By the end of the 1930s, when a wave of criticism of Nazism was beginning to gain momentum in different countries around the world, Kehl once again praised the eugenics policy of the Third Reich. In 1937, in his book *Por que sou Eugenista*, in which he celebrated 20 years of his eugenics campaign, he highlighted the success of that country’s sterilization law, which already had “1500 eugenics tribunals and 77 special appeal boards”. The Brazilian eugenicist made a point of stating that “when a country like this takes such a decision, it is because it is, in reality, an imperative of unquestionable scope”⁵⁸. According to Renato Kehl, the German Eugenics Court, which he defines as “a true code of racial protection”, “has impressed scientists and rulers in several countries, especially in northern Europe, who are gradually adopting the same regulations, only with a few variations”⁵⁹. It is worth remembering that his references to German eugenics were made shortly after another of Renato Kehl’s trips to Germany in 1937 when Nazism was already making strides toward the catastrophe that would explode two years later.

Eugenics, miscegenation, and degeneration

One of the themes that most mobilized Renato Kehl was undoubtedly the relationship between eugenics and racial miscegenation. The debate on miscegenation can be seen as the major paradigm of Brazilian social thought in the first decades of the 20th century. It was through miscegenation that Brazil was formed as a nation, in a process that involved Europeans, indigenous people, and Africans of the most varied racial origins. If in the 1930s there were intellectuals who believed in the myth of racial democracy as a solution for harmonious national integration, or those who saw racial mixing as an optimistic path towards whitening the nation, there were also those who pointed to racial mixing as the biggest obstacle to the formation of a eugenic nation. Renato Kehl was, obviously, in the latter group. Although he stated in the 1920s that Brazil would end up whitening itself “at the expense of a lot of Aryan coconut soap”, from the 1930s onwards he became progressively

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁵⁸ KEHL, Renato. *Por que sou eugenista: 20 anos de campanha eugênica 1917-1937*. Rio de Janeiro: Francisco Alves, 1937.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

more pessimistic about the much-vaunted whitening thesis⁶⁰. In his view, it didn't seem admissible to think that the "mixing of all peoples" could lead to homogeneity, as the supporters of the whitening thesis believed⁶¹.

From the late 1920s onwards, his study of Mendelian genetics led him to understand that racial crossbreeding produced inferior or degenerate "hybrid types"⁶². This was a recurring understanding in the anthropological and genetic studies of that period, most of them strongly committed to scientific racism and Nordic Aryanism⁶³. In his book *Sexo e civilização*, the Brazilian eugenicist debated these studies, citing, for example, authors such as Swedish eugenicist Herman Lundborg and Norwegian Alfred Mjöen, whose works were translated by Kehl himself and published in the pages of *Boletim de Eugenia*. Based on these studies, Kehl commented, "It is impossible to deny, in the light of science", that miscegenation does indeed produce "inferior types". In addition, he pointed out that these and other studies, such as the work of Fritz Lentz, Ernest Rudin, and Herman Werner Siemens, internationally known German eugenicists and often cited by Kehl, provided a lucid defense of "Mendelian rigorism". In his opinion, Mendel's genetics made it possible to "predict the hereditary possibilities of a human cross, as well as within an animal cross, given natural exceptions"⁶⁴.

By following the argument of these authors, Kehl explained that no influence of the environment, disease, or any other morbid condition was more responsible for human degeneration than "heterogeneous crossbreeding", such as between whites and blacks, whites and Indigenous peoples, or whites and Asians. He said the excess of biological variation resulting from this crossbreeding was frighteningly taking place becoming the main threat to civilized societies. In a clear reference to Mendelian theories, he stated that hybrid types were responsible for "deviations from the genetic norm", concluding that "life in a society is all the more intense, disordered, full of vicissitudes, crimes, degeneration, the more heterozygous the elements that make it up"⁶⁵.

As a way of combating racial miscegenation, Renato Kehl even defended "racial inbreeding", going so far as to consider "family inbreeding" as a eugenic

⁶⁰ KEHL, Renato. "As questões de Raças". *Gazeta do Povo*, Curitiba, Oct. 1921.

⁶¹ KEHL, op. cit., 1933, p. 206.

⁶² KEHL, op. cit., 1929a; 1933.

⁶³ BARKAN, op. cit., 1992.

⁶⁴ KEHL, op. cit., 1933, p. 202-203.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

practice⁶⁶. In *Sexo e civilização*, the author explained that he was not defending incestuous marriages, but understood that marriages between “people of close kinship, of the same race and class, with optimal characters”, were indicated to face the great “evil of the race”, heterogeneous miscegenation⁶⁷. This procedure was called “ultra-eugenics”, a measure which, according to Kehl, could fulfill the “eugenic aims of achieving the utopia of social happiness”⁶⁸.

This “ultra-eugenics” was based on the understanding that the more homogeneous or uniform a society was, the more balanced it would be, whether in terms of psychic temperaments and social coexistence, or morphological or physiological aspects. In Kehl’s view, racial homogeneity would produce not only physical and intellectual superiority but also a political and civilizing order. Kehl recalled the cases of genetic selection carried out by producers of sheep, chickens, or even draft or saddle animals, who always sought “perfect uniformity” to obtain the best strains. In his words, “the breeder strives to maintain homogeneity by keeping choice animals as breeding stock and processing selected inbreeding”⁶⁹. These comparisons or examples from studies of animal and plant genetics were also quite common among eugenicists, especially those who used Mendelian genetics to think about the effects of racial mixing on human reproduction.

Turning to the case of Brazil, considered to be one of the most mixed-race countries in the world, Kehl lamented the fact that studies on “racial crossbreeding” were still incipient in the country. In any case, based on the studies produced by authors such as Nina Rodrigues, Paulo Prado, Oliveira Vianna, and Toledo Piza Junior, Kehl pointed out that there were enough elements to attest to the physical weakness and mental instability of mestizos in Brazil⁷⁰. In his sentence, strongly tempered by scientific racism, “the Brazilian mestizos of white and black (mulattos), are, for the most part, ugly and weak elements, often presenting the vices of their ancestors”. He concluded: “Their character is very unstable and they are therefore elements that disrupt national progress from an ethnic and social point of view.”⁷¹.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 240.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 241.

⁶⁸ Ibid. p. 247.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 242.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 200-202. Among Brazilian writers, he especially cited the works of Oliveira Vianna, a writer from Rio de Janeiro with whom he had a very close relationship. Kehl cited above all the book *Populações Meridionais* (Southern Populations), published in 1922, and *Raça e Assimilação* (Race and Assimilation), from 1932.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 200.

Faced with the findings produced by scholars on the subject, even with the backing of internationally known scientists, Kehl stated that “the great evil of Brazil is an evil of race”⁷². That is why eugenicists could no longer be in favor of racial crossbreeding, especially those involving blacks, indigenous peoples, caboclos, and Asians. In his opinion, it was essential that drastic measures to control human reproduction also took into account the threat that miscegenation posed to the future of Brazil. Kehl believed that one of the most efficient ways of limiting the birth of these “undesirable elements” was precisely to build racial selection measures, whether through marriage control and racial segregation as such, or through eugenic sterilization and immigration selection.

In the 1930s, the debate on immigration was the topic that best summed up the expectations of eugenicists to achieve the much-desired racial selection, especially given the wide repercussion this topic had among the congressmen who took part in the National Constituent Assembly of 1933-34. For the Vargas government itself, the immigration issue was fundamental not only to attract healthy workers and supply the labor that sectors of the economy wanted but also to populate the national territory and contribute to the eugenic formation of the country⁷³. It is important to note that nowhere else in the world have discussions about immigration been more closely identified with the construction of national identity than in Brazil. Since the 19th century, the attraction of European immigrants was seen as an essential alternative to replace Africans, Indigenous peoples, and mestizos with “white people”, leading us to think that, in the future, Brazil would be mostly made up of European descendants.

For the members of the eugenics movement, immigration selection was an essential biological policy, as was already evident during the 1929 Eugenics Congress. In general, the agenda of discussions launched during the event even served as a parameter for the issues promoted during the Constituent Assembly of 1933-34. This was due to the widespread campaign by eugenicists in defense of immigration selection. Led by Kehl, the eugenics movement articulated its institutions, the press, and allied representatives so that eugenics demands were put on the agenda. This articulation gained strength especially because among the representatives some doctors and intellectuals identified with eugenic ideas, among them quite prestigious

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 204.

⁷³ GERALDO, Endrica. *O 'perigo alienígena': política imigratória e pensamento racial no governo Vargas (1930-1945)*. Thesis (Doctorate in History) - Unicamp: Campinas, 2007.

figures such as Arthur Neiva, Miguel Couto, Pacheco e Silva, and Xavier de Oliveira⁷⁴.

During the discussions that took place in this committee, it was common to see quotes from eugenicists and anthropologists giving warnings of a need to base immigration legislation on eugenic criteria. Among the international intellectual authorities, there were mentions of Aryanists such as Madison Grant and Vacher de Lapouge, as well as allies of German “racial hygiene” such as John Alfred Mjoen, Fritz Lenz, and Herman Lundborg. Among Brazilians, the most mentioned names were Renato Kehl and Oliveira Vianna⁷⁵. Congressman Xavier de Oliveira, one of the representatives who put together the most arguments to justify the ban on undesirable immigrants, read an open letter that Renato Kehl had sent to the Constituent Assembly in session, in which he warned of the danger that the mixing of “heterogeneous races” represented for the future of Brazil⁷⁶. In this document, he repeated the arguments already present in his 1933 book, published precisely in the heat of the discussions promoted by the constituent assembly. In his words, if “an energetic immigration policy” was not approved, Brazil, “which is already a *melting pot* of races, will be dominated by xantho-negroid elements”⁷⁷.

Some representatives even used the issue of miscegenation as an argument to oppose the entry of non-European immigrants. There was an almost general understanding that European immigration was the most desirable since it would guarantee the racial homogeneity of the Brazilian population soon, referring to the whitening process underway. At the same time, the entry of Asians, Arabs, blacks, and Jews should be prevented or avoided. At the end of the discussions, the Constituent Assembly approved strongly racist legislation that, to a large extent, met the demands of the eugenics movement. In general, the Brazilian constitution repeated what US legislation had approved in the controversial *Johnson-Reed Act* of 1924, which created a quota law that favored European immigration by far, restricting the entry of other nationalities⁷⁸.

⁷⁴ SOUZA, Vanderlei Sebastião de. “Eugenia, racismo científico e antirracismo no Brasil: debates sobre ciência, raça e imigração no movimento eugênico brasileiro (1920-1930)”. *Revista Brasileira de História*, Jan-Apr, 2022, v. 42, n. 89, p. 93-115.

⁷⁵ ANNAES DA ASSEMBLEIA..., op. cit., 1935.

⁷⁶ OLIVEIRA, Xavier de. “Discurso”. In: *Annaes da Assembleia Nacional Constituinte*. National Press. Rio de Janeiro, Vol. 6, p. 449-482, 1935, p. 473. Available: <https://bd.camara.leg.br/bd/handle/bdcamara/8128>; accessed: March 10, 2024.

⁷⁷ KEHL, op. cit., 1933, p. 207.

⁷⁸ SERFERTH, Giralda. “Construindo a nação: hierarquias raciais e o papel do racismo na política de

Final considerations

As pointed out at the beginning of this article, the 1930s scenario in Brazil was marked by strong intellectual and political ambiguities. At the same time as the eugenicists were radicalizing their projects towards negative eugenics, an emerging group of intellectuals led by young social thinkers and modernist writers were producing theses and historical and sociological reflections that challenged the scientific racism en vogue among Brazilians. Curiously, the book *Sexo e civilização: aparas eugênicas* (Sex and civilization: eugenic trimmings), which represented a synthesis of racial determinism, was published in the same year that the sociologist Gilberto Freyre released *Casa-grande e Senzala* (1933), a seminal book that celebrated miscegenation as our greatest identity myth. In a way, we can say that these works synthesize the intellectual disagreements and clashes that took place in the 1930s, especially when considering the different national construction projects on the scene.

The simultaneous production of these works also allows us to understand the ambiguities that marked the political ideologies of the Vargas government itself. On the one hand, Vargas' fascist nationalism brought him closer to racism and the ideas defended by the eugenics movement, as if there were a symbiosis of interests around the relationship between race and national identity. The authoritarian way in which the government maintained control over "socially problematic" groups - including undesirable immigrants, the mentally ill, alcoholics, vagabonds, malandros, capoeiras, and street dwellers - was viewed favorably by eugenicists and more reactionary intellectuals, such as Renato Kehl. Like the eugenicists, the Vargas government also believed that a true nationalist policy should involve the homogenization of the population, based as much on the ordering of social life as on biological and racial control. In this context, Vargas created a series of institutions, state apparatuses, and new techniques for controlling, identifying, selecting, and imprisoning those who threatened the ideology of nationality⁷⁹.

On the other hand, as an expression of the ambiguities that characterized his government, Vargas' nationalization policy also incorporated the discourse of valuing mixed-race Brazil, even adhering to the myth of racial democracy. This is why Gilberto Freyre's work became a reference that

imigração e colonização". In: MAIO, Marcos Chor; SANTOS, Ricardo Ventura. *Raça, ciência e sociedade*. Rio de Janeiro: Fiocruz, 1996, p. 41-58; GERALDO, op. cit., 2007.

⁷⁹ CUNHA, Olívia Maria Gomes da. *Intenção e Gesto: Pessoa, cor e a produção cotidiana da (in)diferença no Rio de Janeiro, 1927-1942*. Rio de Janeiro: National Archives, 2002.

supported this positive view of national identity. As Nancy Stepan rightly points out, despite deep racial and social divisions that marked the Vargas government, throughout the 1930s “the notion that racial and cultural fusion was the solution to Brazil’s racial and social composition became the unofficial ideology of the national state”⁸⁰.

Despite the achievements of the eugenics movement, by the end of the 1930s Renato Kehl’s racial radicalism was losing followers and he became an increasingly less expressive figure. At the same time, the vitality with which he had led the eugenics movement since the 1910s was cooling in the face of Brazil’s ambiguous racial ideologies. The winning national identity myths of the late 1930s conversed much more with theses by Gilberto Freyre and more “moderate” versions of eugenics, more common in the 1910s and 1920s, than with Kehl’s negative eugenics and extremism. The most radical measures, such as eugenic sterilization and marriage control, would never be officially approved by the state.

Although the Vargas government, already in the *Estado Novo*, continued its policy of nationalization and persecution of undesirable immigrants, the eugenic measures against miscegenation seemed ineffective for a country that was increasingly opting for the project of whitening the population. Instead of harsh racial segregation, as Kehl wanted, Brazil seemed more and more willing to embrace miscegenation as a deliberate policy of racial homogenization. The elimination of blacks, indigenous peoples, and other “undesirable races” would not follow the path of official segregation, but of a project of racial and cultural fusion with European immigrants. In this sense, it was not a matter of rejecting eugenics, but of adopting it from a perspective more suited to the Brazilian racial ideologies en vogue then, especially those that combined the myth of racial democracy and the whitening of the nation.

This helps to explain the sense of frustration that Renato Kehl seemed to feel at the end of the 1930s. His project to implement a radical biological policy, along the lines of German “racial hygiene” and American racial segregationism, found few supporters in government institutions. Not even the cherished dream of creating a Brazilian Institute of Eugenics, which Kehl wanted as an institution at the service of the state, came to fruition. Although fascism and the allure of authoritarian regimes brought Renato Kehl and the Vargas government closer together, there was a certain distance between them that would never be overcome.

⁸⁰ STEPAN, op. cit., 2005, p. 174.

For all these reasons, Renato Kehl reached the end of the 1930s more isolated, while the eugenics movement lost its institutional strength. An example of this was the closure of the *Boletim de Eugenia* in 1933, which in its last issues no longer had the editorial direction of Renato Kehl, whose functions had been delegated to Octavio Domingues and Toledo Piza Junior, former partners of the eugenics movement⁸¹. Piza Junior himself noted, in a letter written in 1938, that Kehl “was the only true eugenicist in this immense Brazil”, and that despite his efforts “to form nuclei or surround himself with companions, perhaps to share the glory of these 20 years of campaigning, the truth is that you are always alone”⁸².

Toledo Piza Junior’s observation seemed to say more about Renato Kehl’s isolation at the end of the 1930s than about the results of his campaign in defense of eugenics. The book *Por que sou Eugenista*, published in 1937 as a celebratory memoir of his 20 years as a eugenicist, can also be seen as a strategy by Renato Kehl to establish a bridge between the past and the present, as his last effort to remain influential in the intellectual and political field.

In any case, Kehl’s isolation and discouragement were also perceived by Oliveira Vianna, a writer with whom he had a close intellectual affinity. In a letter sent to Kehl in 1938, he asked his friend not to lose heart in his “benevolent work”, referring to the eugenics campaign. He wrote: “I noticed the last time we met before you departed for Germany, that you were a little discouraged and skeptical about your efforts.”⁸³. As a way of motivating his friend not to lose heart, Oliveira Vianna stressed that the dissemination of an idea like eugenics always had a “slow and invisible diffusion, but not null”, meaning that time, in the future, would be responsible for showing the value of his campaigns in defense of eugenics.

⁸¹ For more details on Octavio Domingues and Toledo Piza Junior’s relationship with Renato Kehl and the eugenics movement, see HABIB, Paula Arantes Botelho Briglia. *Agricultura e Biologia na Escola Superior de Agricultura ‘Luiz de Queiroz’ (ESALQ): os estudos de genética nas trajetórias de Carlos Teixeira Mendes, Octavio Domingues e Salvador de Toledo Piza Jr. (1917-1937)*. Thesis (Doctorate in History) - Fiocruz: Rio de Janeiro, 2010.

⁸² Letter from Salvador de Toledo Piza Junior to Renato Kehl. São Paulo, November 19, 1938 (Fundo Pessoal Renato Kehl - Departamento de Arquivo e Documentação da Casa de Oswaldo Cruz - DAD-COC).

⁸³ Letter from Oliveira Vianna to Renato Kehl. Niterói, April 1, 1938 (Fundo Pessoal Renato Kehl - Departamento de Arquivo e Documentação da Casa de Oswaldo Cruz - DAD-COC).

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