

# Hygienism, Eugenics and Racism in Portugal in the first half of the twentieth century

## Eugenismo, Higienismo e Racismo em Portugal na primeira metade do século XX

António Rafael Amaro\*  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3843-6577>

### Abstract

This article aims to highlight the influence and dissemination of eugenicist, hygienist, and racist concepts in Portuguese society in the first half of the 20th century. The Galtonian eugenics perspective was not only known in Portugal as it also impacted the intellectual, university and medical elites. However, the eugenicist theories and practices were not strong enough to be translated, what happened in other European countries, the institutionalization of radical eugenics measures. The hygienist tradition, Catholic opposition, and the reduced acceptance of eugenics in liberal-conservative and progressive circles in Portugal conditioned the acceptance of these eugenic theories and practices in the country. This reality, similar in many respects to what has occurred in other Latin countries with a Catholic origin. Nevertheless, they have some specific features which require an explanation. Particularly, the singularities of the relations between science, society, and political projects present at the reception of the different models of eugenia. Its methodology has been essentially analytical-bibliographic.

**Keywords:** Eugenics. Hygienism. Racism. Modernisation. Colonialism

### Resumo

Com este artigo pretendemos destacar a influência e divulgação das concepções higienistas, eugenistas e racistas na sociedade portuguesa na primeira metade do século XX. A perspetiva eugenista galtoniana não só era conhecida em Portugal, como teve impacto nas elites intelectuais, universitárias e médicas. No entanto, as teorias e práticas eugenistas nunca foram suficientemente fortes para se terem traduzido, como aconteceu noutros países europeus, na institucionalização de medidas eugénicas radicais. A tradição higienista,

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\* PhD in Contemporary History. Associate Professor at the University of Coimbra, Faculty of Economics. Integrated Researcher at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research Studies (CEIS20/UC). E-mail: amaro@fe.uc.pt.

a oposição católica e a reduzida aceitação da eugenia nos círculos liberais conservadores e progressistas de Portugal acabaram por condicionar a recepção das teorias e práticas eugénicas no país. Esta realidade, semelhante, em muitos aspetos, ao que se verificou noutros países latinos de origem católica, tem, no entanto, algumas características específicas que exigem explicação. Em particular, as singularidades das relações entre a ciência, sociedade e projetos políticos em presença no momento da recepção dos diferentes modelos de eugenia. A metodologia utilizada foi essencialmente analítico-bibliográfica.

**Palavras-chave:** Eugenismo. Higienismo, Racismo. Modernização. Colonialismo.

## Introduction

The eugenics movement, as a social philosophy, developed in the context of the scientific and positivist paradigm, benefiting from the intersection with other areas of knowledge on the rise in the early twentieth century (medicine, psychiatry, biology, statistics, anthropology, and demography). Even so, recent research on different countries, using a comparative methodology, has shown that eugenics is far from being a homogeneous and coherent scientific movement. On the contrary, it developed as a “multiform archipelago”<sup>1</sup>, where the articulation between scientific positions and the political measures proposed by eugenicists varied greatly, both between states and within each one, and even over time<sup>2</sup>.

As a result, the eugenics movement has many differences in acquiescence, being similar only in the maintenance of some scientific misconceptions, such as the biologization of imminently social factors. It was, in essence, an optimistic and totalitarian doctrine regarding the power of science and heredity. It is possible that this reason, eugenics has always been seen by its critics as a biased way to use the triumph of reason and science. And as a biopolitical project, it ended up fuelling some of the darkest imperialist and racist utopias in the 20th century.

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<sup>1</sup> WEINGART, Peter. «Science and Political Culture. Eugenics in Comparative Perspective» In *Scandinavian Journal of History*, v. 24, n. 2, 1999, pp. 163-177.

<sup>2</sup> KEVLES, Daniel J. *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995; BASHFORD, Alison; LEVINE, Philippa (Eds.). *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010; TURDA, Marius. *Modernism and Eugenics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010; TURDA, Marius; GILLETTE, Aaron. *Latin Eugenics in Comparative Perspective*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.

Despite the centrality of heredity, it was “social and personality traits such as intelligence, criminality, alcoholism, schizophrenia, and manic-depressive insanity” which led to eugenic political and social interventions<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, they were wrongly convinced that these features were genetically determined<sup>4</sup>. Where these mistakes were extreme, eugenics became a powerful political technology in which the power and well-being of the person were determined by the selective reproduction of the “fittest”. And, in the radicalism of its convictions, by eliminating the “unfit” and “impure racists”<sup>5</sup>. This “scientific racism”, based on an ideology that differentiates races, classes, and cultures has fed some of the most dangerous imperialist utopias<sup>6</sup>.

The different scientific paradigms do not succeed each other in isolation from the historical circumstances that produce them. There is a close relationship between the science that is produced, the society that supports and legitimizes it, and the political projects that emanate from here. An eugenics global understanding, in its different manifestations and national specificities (which, as an unsystematized idea, precedes in some of its principles and purposes the theory coined in 1883 by Francis Galton), and requires a close connection with the particular history of each country. Most of all, when we know today that, although eugenics in its most negative effects is associated with Nazism, it has served various powers, right and left, from dictators and totalitarian regimes to liberal regimes. Belief in the possibility of creating improved future generations by manipulating human genetics passed by the reforming minds. In this sense, the eugenics movement, rather than a clear set of scientific principles, ended up placing a new path, discussing social and political problems in the public arena and in the hands of the state. This biopolitical perspective, spearheaded by doctors and men of science, where hygienists, eugenicists, and different forms of nationalism intersected, was indeed a new idea in a new and troubled time<sup>7</sup>. It even sought, as some authors recognize, not only scientific authority but a certain classical humanitarian lineage. Many saw themselves as worthy bearers of a new idea, based on a certain perspective of modernity. Moreover, secure in their belief, few

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<sup>3</sup> ALLEN, Garland E. «Eugenics and Modern Biology: Critiques of Eugenics, 1910-1945» In *Annals of Human Genetics*, n. 75, 2011, p. 314.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, *Ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> Idem, *op. cit.*, pp. 314-325.

<sup>6</sup> BASHFORD; LEVINE, *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> On the concept of biopolitics, cf. FOUCAULT, Michel. *Microfísica do Poder*. 23, Ed. S. Paulo, Graal, 2004.

doubted the serious ethical and political problems that their theories and practices would raise.

We will understand how in Portugal the eugenist theory was received. Firstly, to understand how the defenders of eugenics set out to perfect “the race” in a cultural and ideological environment in which the causes of Portuguese decadence were contrary to eugenicist proposals. The regeneration of the nation, in which the “race” was seen as the “raw material” subject to historical constraints, required more education than eugenicist interventions<sup>8</sup>.

In methodological terms, we will use secondary sources preferably, seeking to bring new interpretations to how the eugenics project confronted other cultural and ideological movements that also aimed to regenerate the “race” and the nation. And so, in point one, we address the way eugenics was received. In point 2, we will analyze the main political, cultural, and ideological barriers that conditioned the acceptance of the eugenics movement. Finally, in point 3, we will focus on how the Catholic hierarchy positioned itself, especially in the 1930s and in an authoritarian and corporatist political context, in the face of the advance of eugenicist ideas.

## The reception of eugenics in Portugal

Such as in other Latin countries with a conservative and Catholic culture, the eugenic theory and practices were not passively received in the Portuguese society. On the contrary, the political and social conceptions of peripheral country were assimilated (economically and culturally) in the world. However, centralist power in respect to the colonial empire. In the first half of the 20th century, the eugenics movement found its defenders in Portugal, but its social philosophy never seduced the different proposals for a national regeneration, either on the left or on the right. The political – ideological confrontations, in the first half of the 20th century in Portugal, in the context of the crisis of demolitionism, focused on two models of development able to overcome modernity which the intellectual and political elites considered imperfect and/or unfinished. For some, the secularization of society and the rationalist, enlightenment, demoliberal legacy had already gone too far, and it was important to return to the pre-liberal period, establishing a new conservative and authoritarian Catholic corporate order. For others, on the

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<sup>8</sup> CATROGA, Fernando. Antero de Quental. História. Socialismo. Política. Lisboa: Editorial Notícias, 2001, pp. 125-146.

other hand, need to promote the modernity, secularization, democracy, and socialism advance.

It was within this social framework here simplified which in practice opposed those in Portuguese society who defended the cultural heritage inherited from the Enlightenment to those who wanted to overcome it, and that eugenics was received in Portugal. The most significant research carried out to date on eugenics in Portugal is unanimous in considering that eugenics was known and discussed in relevant institutions such as at the University<sup>9</sup>. It also had defenders who were well politically and professionally positioned and able to disseminate their ideas, both in specialized newspapers and through the Portuguese Society of Eugenic Studies (SPEE), created in 1937. Even so, the eugenic theory of the improvement of the breed, coined by Francis Galton, not only left no trace of political institutionalization, but also was not included in the main political projects, either on the left or the on the right, mobilizing the Portuguese between the two world wars. It is a fact that the supposed superiority of races, underlying eugenicist theory, helped to legitimize the narrative of the “civilizing action” of the Portuguese over the colonized people, considered as inferior<sup>10</sup>. The Portuguese colonial nationalism took advantage of this perspective with a State ideology during the First Republic. With an even greater ideological strength under the Estado Novo (The New State), especially after the approval of the “Colonial Act” in 1930, and with Armindo Monteiro as Minister for the Colonies (1931-1935).

The political rise of Oliveira Salazar within the military dictatorship and the beginning of the Estado Novo (The New State) (1933) was undoubtedly taken advantage of by the most fervent eugenicists to embed the idea to purify the Portuguese race, which has always been seen as decadent, in the corporatist authoritarianism of the new regime and O Homem Novo (The New Man) to create. But their eugenicist proposals, on the one hand, were not seen as a credible alternative to the strong hygienist tradition in the field and, on

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<sup>9</sup> CLEMINSON, Richard. *Catholicism, Race and Empire. Eugenics in Portugal, 1900-1950*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2014; \_\_\_\_\_. «Eugenics in Portugal, 1900-1950: setting a research agenda» In *East Central Europe*, v. 38 n. 1, 2011, pp. 133-154; MATOS, Patrícia Ferraz de. «Aperfeiçoar a ‘raça’, salvar a nação: eugenia, teorias nacionalistas e situação colonial em Portugal» In *Trabalhos de Antropologia e Etnologia*, v. 50, 2010, pp. 89-111. NINHOS, Cláudia. «A discussão em torno da eugenia em Portugal» In PIMENTEL, Irene Flunser; NINHOS, Cláudia. *Salazar, Portugal e o Holocausto*. Lisboa: Temas e Debates, 2013, pp. 209-242; PEREIRA, Ana Leonor. *Darwin em Portugal (1865-1914)*. Filosofia. História. Engenharia Social. Coimbra: Almedina, 2001; WEBER, Maria Julieta. «eugenia latina em Portugal e no Brasil (primeira metade do século XX)» In *Trabalhos de Antropologia e Etnologia*, v. 63, pp. 205-217.

<sup>10</sup> ALMEIDA, Miguel Vale de. «Longing for oneself: hybridism and miscegenation in colonial and postcolonial Portugal» In *Etnográfica*, v. 1, 2002, pp. 181-200.

the other, they were not entirely consistent about what they considered to be the “problems of mestizaje” and “cross-breeding”, which they saw as forms of the decadence of the nation and the race<sup>11</sup>.

Eusébio Tamagnini, a lecturer at the University of Coimbra and the first president of the SPEE, who was greatly influenced by German eugenics, had no doubts about the superiority of races. He believed and defended that the strongest races were endowed with a superior culture and would therefore be “better equipped” to take over vast territorial spaces<sup>12</sup>. He believed and defended that the strongest races were endowed with a superior culture and would therefore be “better equipped” to take over vast territorial spaces. This supposedly scientific narrative not only legitimised all kinds of imperialism and colonialism, but was supposed to lead Portugal, like Nazi Germany, to adopt eugenic practices that would prevent the “Portuguese race” from decaying. We can thus see that eugenics had its defenders in Portugal (Eusébio Tamagnini, Mendes Correia, Barahona Fernandes, José Aires de Azevedo, to name a few), involving doctors, scientists, and anthropologists. However, even in the 1930s, when imperialist/colonialist nationalism struggled with the aspiration of a New Man. Eugenia never had political impact for Salazarism to adopt eugenic formal measures.

### **Eugenics as biopolitics: the political and cultural barriers which conditioned its reception in Portugal**

Eugenics emerges depending on a theory of heredity that underpins a conception of the population biological evolution much centered on the physical, intellectual, and moral decline of the human species<sup>13</sup>. In Portugal, as we have already mentioned, although there were several eugenics defenders and its institutionalization, some of them with a clear German influence, the truth is that these ideas ended up not being politically materialized into eugenic laws. Richard Cleminson, in his work *Catholicism, Race and Empire: Eugenics in Portugal, 1900-1950*, gives three fundamental reasons to explain the weak impact of eugenics in Portugal: 1) a low level of institutionalization of eugenic practices; 2) opposition from Catholics; 3) the conservative nature of the Estado Novo Corporativo<sup>14</sup>. The same author adds that, in Portugal,

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<sup>11</sup> NINHOS, op. cit., pp. 209-242.

<sup>12</sup> Idem. Ibidem.

<sup>13</sup> CLEMINSON, op. cit., *Catholicism, Race and Empire...*

<sup>14</sup> Idem, Ibidem.

science and the eugenics movement were limited to three main areas of debate: individualized studies on mental health, often from a biotypological perspective; a particular position on racial miscegenation in the context of the colonial empire; and a diffuse model of social hygiene, maternity, and childcare<sup>15</sup>.

The aforementioned author, in another of his studies, also sought to critically evaluate Portugal's inclusion in what he considered to be the two great international currents on eugenics: the "Latin eugenics" model and the "Germanic eugenics". Concluding that, although Germanic influences were audible in Eusébio Tamagnini, José Aires de Azevedo and Leopoldina Ferreira de Paulo, along with Portugal's weak involvement in the International Latin Federation of Eugenics Societies<sup>16</sup> the eugenics model that dominated was decidedly environmentalist, less focused on "racial hygiene" and more on pronatalist family hygiene<sup>17</sup>. In other words, what happened in Portugal "was an ebb and flow of influences from different types of eugenics, which varied according to location and personal and institutional contexts"<sup>18</sup>. While Eusébio Tamagnini in Coimbra was pro-German, Almeida Garrett in Porto coincided with Latin eugenics forms. While anthropology in Coimbra was largely Germanic, in Porto, where Mendes Correia pontificated, neo-Lamarckism dominated and the influential field of social hygiene shared similarities with Latin eugenics<sup>19</sup>.

In other words, despite the singularities of a peripheral country, the deep-rooted and strong tradition of public hygiene, based on eclecticism and neo-Lamarckism, was always dominant in Portugal<sup>20</sup>. Thus bringing the

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<sup>15</sup> Idem, *Ibidem*.

<sup>16</sup> In August 1937, a meeting of the Latin Federation of Eugenics Societies was held in Paris, with very limited participation from Portuguese eugenicists, represented only by Dr Almerindo Lessa. Although the conference proceedings mentioned that a Portuguese eugenics society was in the process of being established, there is no indication of any formal involvement by the Sociedade Portuguesa para o Estudo da Eugenia, which had already been officially established in 1934. Cf. TURDA; GILLETTE, *op. cit.*

<sup>17</sup> Idem. *Ibidem*.

<sup>18</sup> Idem, *ibidem*, p. 85.

<sup>19</sup> TURDA; GILLETTE, *op. cit.*

<sup>20</sup> For a better understanding of the influences of Darwinism or Lamarckism on Portuguese eugenic thought, cf. PEREIRA, Ana Leonor. «Eugenia em Portugal?» In *Revista de História das Ideias*, Vol. 20, 1999, pp. 531-60; PEREIRA, *op. cit.*, Darwin em Portugal...; MATOS, *op. cit.* Aperfeiçoar a 'raça', salvar a nação..., pp. 89-111; PIMENTEL, Irene Flunser. «A assistência social e familiar do Estado Novo nos anos 30 e 40» In *Análise Social*, n.151-152, 1999, pp. 477-508; \_\_\_\_\_. «O aperfeiçoamento da raça: a eugenia na primeira metade do século XX» In *História*, n. 3, 1998, pp.18-27.

Portuguese reality closer to what has become common in the international literature known as “Latin eugenics”.

In this sense, as different authors have noted, the French cultural and scientific influence and the neo-Lamarckist conceptions of eugenics among the elites directly linked to this issue ended up being decisive for the eugenic model that took hold in Portugal. Indeed, the influence of German eugenics was more vocal and dominant in the SPEE, but this was never enough to prevent the hygienist tradition — Almerindo Lessa, considered the representative of “Latin Eugenics” in Portugal and a disciple of Abel Salazar, represented this tradition — from being dominant. This eclectic, neo-Lamarckist perspective of eugenic ideas indicates something that somehow singularises the Portuguese reality, even within the framework of “Latin eugenics”: the clear subordination of eugenics to hygienism<sup>21</sup>. The latter ended up constituting, in practice, not only an alternative model to the various forms of eugenics but above all a strong theoretical and scientific conditioning to how the debate on eugenics took place in Portuguese society.

The eugenics movement, as we have already mentioned, understood from a biopolitical perspective, is part of a process that accompanies the development of science and needs institutions and political projects to involve it at all times. It is, in fact, this need that essentially explains the differences in its reception and development. In the Portuguese case, as we have also seen, the eugenics movement never had the necessary political support from the state. Neither during the First Republic (1910-1926), nor during the Military Dictatorship (1926-1933) or the Estado Novo (1933-1974) did the various powers see eugenics as a useful tool to develop their projects. Even in the 1930s, a period in which the Salazar dictatorship made no secret of its totalitarian ambition to create a New Man, the regime’s elites refused to include any negative eugenics measures in their political project. They even refused the eugenic temptation of “perfecting the race”, based on the authentic social engineering proposed by the eugenicists.

One of the structural components of Portuguese ideological culture, especially among the elites, was the politically instrumental and operative use of the indissociable binomial decadence/regeneration. Any interpretation of the present and how to change it was somehow “decadent”. On the other side, all the victorious political movements that succeeded it, assumed the status of promoters of the necessary regeneration. The same happened with

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<sup>21</sup> MATOS, op. cit., Aperfeiçoar a “raça”, salvar a nação...; NINHOS, op. cit., pp. 209-242.

the victory of liberalism (1820-1834) over absolutism. The same happened with the establishment of the Republic in 1910, with the end of the Republic (1926) and the establishment of the Estado Novo (1933), which also included Portugal's regeneration in its narrative. However, no other period experienced the nation's sense of decadence so clearly (which was nothing more than the perception of the country's backwardness in relation to more developed countries) than the one that ended up celebrating the iconoclastic generation of the 1870s (Antero de Quental, Oliveira Martins, Eça de Queirós)<sup>22</sup>. It is important to remember, as an important aspect of the issue of eugenics, that the root causes of our decadence as a people and as a nation were not biological and/or hereditary, but cultural and moral. For the more progressive sectors, it was the lack of education and the fact that we did not take the whole Enlightenment legacy further which explained our backwardness. The more conservative and anti-liberal sectors blamed the entire legacy of the French Revolution for our decadence.

Although eugenics as a practice and legal formalization was known and disseminated by a minority of doctors and scientists at conferences and in specialized newspapers, presenting it as a technology able to "improve the race", it was never influential and attractive enough to be included in the main political strategies dominant in the first half of the 20th century. The explanation for our decadence and the crisis of liberalism in the inter-war period, especially in the 1920s, mobilized Portuguese elites politically and intellectually. But eugenics was practically ignored by the cultural and ideological movements that hegemonized the debate in Portuguese society, on both the left and the on the right. We found nothing relevant about eugenics in the magazine *Seara Nova* (1921)<sup>23</sup>, which the left hegemonized the political, cultural, and ideological debate in the 1920s and 1930s, into a space where there were several polemics on practically all contemporary political, scientific, and cultural currents<sup>24</sup>. This obliviousness on the part

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<sup>22</sup> CATROGA, op. cit.

<sup>23</sup> The seareiros, fully committed to neo-Enlightenment rationalism in defence of modernity, based their entire struggle on the primacy of culture, political action, and the efficacy of ideas in transforming societies. They prioritised, with an assumed intellectual vanguardism, the improvement of elites through education and knowledge as a solution for the regeneration of Portugal, rejecting positivism and materialist philosophical conceptions. This stands in stark contrast, as we can see, to the social engineering proposals advocated by the eugenicists. Regarding the seareiro movement and the Seara Nova journal, Cf. AMARO, António Rafael. *A Revista Seara Nova nos anos vinte e trinta: Memória, Cultura, Poder* (1921-1939). Viseu: Universidade Católica Portuguesa, 1995.

<sup>24</sup> On culture, politics, and science in the 1920s-30s, we highlight only the most significant debates involving António Sérgio: the controversies with António Sardinha, leader of the integralist movement;

of the Seareiros intellectuals, who were always so aware of current cultural and scientific developments, could be explained by one of two reasons: a) eugenics and scientific and biopolitical issues were unknown among the Seareiros, which is hard to believe given the group's sensitivity to issues of this nature; b) or, more likely, eugenics in Portugal remained very institutionally circumscribed, within a very limited scientific framework.

Our investigation on the main government bodies of the conservative and anti-modernist movements linked to Lusitanian Integralism, which on the right brought together the anti-Enlightenment elites and defenders of corporatist authoritarianism, yielded a result that was in every way similar to the one we have already mentioned for *Seara Nova*: a surprising silence on eugenics and, even when the issue was the "Race/Nation" and their regeneration (always seen as an unity), the solutions presented did not go beyond the hereditary route. The regeneration needed was more cultural than biological, more institutional than hereditary.

Does this mean that eugenics had no advocates in Portugal? Of course not. As we have already mentioned, there are countless examples of doctors, university professors, and researchers who publicized and defended eugenics as a solution to be taken into account for the physical and intellectual elevation of the Portuguese. These personalities held positions of the utmost importance, and it is enough to look at those who, at the beginning of the 1930s (1934, when the Statutes were approved), took part in the formation of the SPEE<sup>25</sup>. Professor Eusébio Tamagnini, Minister of Public Instruction

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with Cabral Moncada, a law professor at the University of Coimbra, regarding the concept of history; with Abel Salazar, on the dissemination of science, framed by neo-positivism; with Bento de Jesus Caraça, on science and culture, among others. Cf. FITAS, Augusto; PRÍNCIPE, João (Eds). *A Seara Nova e os Debates Contemporâneos*. Lisboa: Caleidoscópio, 2022.

<sup>25</sup> As founders of the Portuguese Society of Eugenic Studies, in 1934, the following stand out a) linked to the University of Coimbra as professors, namely José Alberto dos Reis, Director of the Faculty of Law (1916-1920 and 1922-1927) and future President of the National Assembly of the Estado Novo Corporativo (1935-1938; 1938-1942; 1942-1945); Alberto Pessoa, Alberto Rocha Brito (Director of Dermatology Service); Álvaro de Matos (Founder of the Coimbra Maternity Hospital), all professors at the Faculty of Medicine; The doctor and professors, Henrique Jardim de Vilhena, were elected responsible for the Lisbon section of SPEE (between 1925-1926, he was rector of the University of Coimbra and published several works on anatomy and anthropology). Henrique João Barahona also belonged to the Lisbon section, graduated from the Lisbon Faculty of Medicine in 1930, and who would become a scholarship holder, between 1934-1936, from the National Education Board in Nazi Germany. As responsible for the Porto section of SPEE, António Mendes Correia (1888-1960), graduated in medicine, was elected in 1911. Despite having a degree in medicine, António Mendes Correia stood out as a professor of History, Geography and Ethnology at the Faculty of Letters of Porto and Full Professor at the Faculty of Sciences in the same city. He was Director of the Institute for Scientific Research in Anthropology at the Faculty of Sciences of Porto (1923), Director of the Escola Superior Colonial, which later became known as Instituto Superior de Estudos Ultramarinos (1946), and President of the Lisbon Geography Society (1951), among other positions.

(1934-1936), should be highlighted for his social and political significance. Although he did not register his interests, as a minister he approved the SPEE Statutes, which he would later direct.

Only three years after SPEE's foundation it was possible to have their own buildings, precisely at the Anthropology Institute of the University of Coimbra where Eusébio Tamagnini was the director. If we look at the ambitious goals of the SPEE Statutes, which aimed to "promote the study of heredity and eugenics, with a view to the physical and intellectual improvement of the Portuguese", what create "in public opinion an environment advantageous to eugenics", able to take it to schools, the family and to corporations and associations, in line with the corporatist matrix of the regime, perhaps we can say that its impact on Portuguese society fell short of the ambitious intentions of the main signatories<sup>26</sup>.

Even so, the effects on Portuguese society of the emergence of new protagonists linked to scientific development (doctors, scientists, researchers linked to biology and population studies) who, in some way, rivaled and progressively dethroned the elites linked to the humanities, should be highlighted. These new actors were given the authority by the new sciences, seen as the debate on the decline of the nation and the "race" from a completely different perspective: it was not history, culture, or mentality that explained everything about people's success but by the new knowledge brought by maths, engineering, economics, demography, biology and genetics.

From what we have said above, it is not surprising that the eugenics movement found it difficult to gain acceptance in Portuguese society. From the outset, eugenics found it very difficult to position itself as an alternative to the dominant environmental hygienism, to the political-cultural reformism and mentalities in common with political projects on the left and on the right, and quite naturally, to the anti-modernity matrix of the Catholic Church. The eugenics proposal was part of a long journey of Enlightenment, secularisation, and rationalist worldviews that Catholics had always fought against. And so they allied themselves, albeit for different reasons, with all the sectors on the left and on the right that rejected eugenicist biopolitics as an instrument to regenerate the "race" and the nation. The weight of the historical-cultural tradition explaining Portuguese decadence thus also ended up conditioning how eugenicist theories were received. In effect, the eugenicist reform

<sup>26</sup> For a better understanding of the content of the Statutes of the Portuguese Society for Eugenic Studies, cf. PORTUGAL. Portaria 7948, Diário do Governo, I Série, n.º 293, de 14 de dezembro de 1934. (<https://files.diariodarepublica.pt/gratuitos/1s/1934/12/29300.pdf>)

agenda was confronted with a narrative of a Portuguese nation cleansed of its multiethnicity (Celts, Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Jews, Arabs, Africans)<sup>27</sup>, in which only the “flagrant traces” left by the Germans were recognized, devaluing the Semitic or African presence<sup>28</sup>.

The weight of a historical-literary culture (as opposed to a so-called exact sciences culture) to explain the causes of Portuguese decadence and the existence of an important neo-Lamarckist tradition in hygiene and public health, practices greatly conditioned the biosocial acceptance of eugenics with its strong hereditary slant<sup>29</sup>. The position of the Catholic Church was always closer to this perspective, as we will see below.

### The Catholic Church's opposition to eugenics

Eugenics was known, discussed, and disseminated in circles closely linked to health and the university, but it is worth to recognize that its proposals never took a center stage in a public debate. Firstly, for scientific, social, and political reasons. Portugal was far from having scientists and scientific institutions linked to eugenics with the weight and capacity to put eugenic theory and practices at the center of the discussion on their own. This claim was jeopardized from the outset by the fact that the most influential political elites, linked to the various regenerative political projects in Portuguese society in the first half of the 20th century, did not include eugenic biopolitical therapies in their decadent diagnoses. The fact that a large part of public social assistance was very dependent on the role of institutions linked to the Catholic Church, where there was a hygienist tradition with evidence of persistent social practice, conditioned the debate and the degree of eugenics acceptance. The hygienist perspective of disease prevention and the eradication of social problems such as alcoholism and prostitution, as well as the subordination of the hereditary response to the neo-lamarckist paradigm that had been known and practiced for a long time, may help to explain how the weak public debate among the political elites at stake. It should be noted, in this regard, that the neo-Lamarckist perspective in a

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<sup>27</sup> It should be remembered that António Sardinha (1887–1925), founder and principal ideologue of Integralismo Lusitano, did not even acknowledge the influence of the Arabs. Despite the historical evidence of the many peoples who inhabited the Iberian Peninsula, for him, the “purity of the race” remained unaltered.

<sup>28</sup> MATOS, op. cit., *Anthropology, Nationalism and Colonialism...*; \_\_\_\_\_, op. cit., *Aperfeiçoar a “raça”, salvar a nação...*

<sup>29</sup> PEREIRA, op. cit., *Eugenia em Portugal?*, pp. 531-60.

scientific and secularising context, which imposed new challenges to the role of the Church in society and family, was easier to accept among Catholics.

Even so, in Portugal, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church followed the debates on eugenics, which, it should be noted, had well-known lay Catholic supporters, without any official public controversy worthy of note. No formal stance on eugenics is known to have been taken by the Catholic hierarchy (nor is any official stance known to have been taken by Oliveira Salazar's government), although the Pope's doctrinal guidelines were well known. The papal encyclical "Casti connubii" (December 1930) re-established the Church's position and its authority in the "sacralized" sphere of the family, marriage, and sexuality. At a time when, in some Protestant countries, gaps were opening up towards the acceptance of positive and negative eugenic practices, Pius XI's encyclical reiterated his opposition to any form of birth control, sterilization, or abortion. The red lines, ere drawn, moved away from the Anglican Church which, in August 1930, at the Lambeth Conference, had recognized artificial birth control. This is an unacceptable principle among Catholics, namely the interference of science in marriage and reproduction. Admitting this, as the eugenicists argued, was not only a denial of the sacredness of marriage but also an intrusion into the domain of sexuality and the family.

In the aforementioned encyclical "Casti connubii" it is reaffirmed at one point:

"With too much solicitude for eugenic ends, they not only give certain salutary advice so that the health and vigor of future offspring may be easily achieved – which is certainly not contrary to right reason – but they go so far as to put the eugenic end before any other, even of a higher order, and desire that marriage be forbidden by public authority to all those who, according to the processes and conjectures of science, believe that they should give birth to defective offspring because of hereditary transmission, even though they are fit to marry"<sup>30</sup>.

As far as we can tell, the Catholic Church was opposed to all forms of negative eugenics, and, above all, it was concerned about the interference of science and the state in an institution like the family. In Portugal, Catholics not only followed this doctrine, but were also attentive to its evolution in its Portuguese society. In June 1933, the *Jornal Novidades* (The News), the official organ of the Portuguese bishops, warned Catholics to take "the necessary

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<sup>30</sup> PIO XI. Carta encíclica casti connubii do Papa Pio XI sobre o matrimónio Cristão.

precautions to consider this new science”<sup>31</sup>. From their point of view, they should not see eugenics as a “simple medical chapter, harmless and specialized because, under the cover of the scientific spirit, a philosophy of materialist absolutism is being propagated (compare man with the animal), a policy of state absolutism (the right of the state to intervene in the intimate lives of citizens)”<sup>32</sup>.

The concerns about eugenics, it is curious to note, were not directly related to the Portuguese reality, but to the publication of a book by Tristão de Athayde (pseudonym of Alceu Amoroso Lima), a Brazilian catholic writer and intellectual<sup>33</sup>. The Portuguese Catholic journalist, defining the orientation of the newspaper *Novidades*, took advantage of the publication of the book *Ensaio de Biologia*, by the aforementioned Brazilian author, of criticizing the writer Bernard Shaw (Irish playwright, and defender of eugenics) accusing him of conveying ideas that present “the eugenic transformation of humanity” as “the only one that counts”, devaluing what could be achieved through “modifications to political, social or religious institutions”<sup>34</sup>.

In Portugal too, regretted the same writer of the main newspaper of the Portuguese episcopate, it was possible to feel “the invasion of eugenicist tyranny treading the Portuguese land, blown from all sides as a medicine against our social backwardness”<sup>35</sup>. And sharing Tristão de Athayde’s ideas to Brazil, he concluded: “like him, we believe that the worst evil to fight is not barbarism, as is usually said, but so-called civilization”. At the same time, trying to see in the supposed scientific modernity of eugenics no more than “an old pagan idea”, he criticized the “freaks that are sought to be introduced as discoveries and progress achieved by new lights”<sup>36</sup>. From his point of view, “eugenics, in its essence, is as old as paganism”<sup>37</sup>. And, once again quoting the Brazilian Catholic intellectual Tristão de Athayde, who in turn used the

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<sup>31</sup> NOVIDADES, n.º 11 759, 24 de junho, 1933, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> Idem. *Ibidem*.

<sup>33</sup> On the impact of Tristão de Athayde’s book, «Ensaio de Biologia», Livraria Católica, 1933, and, from the same author, «Limites da Eugenia» In *Ensaio de Biologia*, Livraria Católica, 1933, see GIESBRECHT, Daniel F. «Divus contra Galton: o debate eugênico a partir da produção intelectual católica brasileira na década de 1930» In *ARIES Anuario de Antropología Iberoamericana*, pp. 1-6, 2023. (<https://aries.aibr.org/articulo/2023/27/4897/divus-contra-galton-o-debate-eugenico-a-partir-da-producao-intelectual-catolica-brasileira-na-decada-de-1930>)

<sup>34</sup> NOVIDADES, op. cit.

<sup>35</sup> Idem. *Ibidem*.

<sup>36</sup> Idem. *Ibidem*.

<sup>37</sup> Idem. *Ibidem*.

Greek poet Teognis (who wrote six centuries BC), the writer for the newspaper *Novidades* pays a special attention to the following passage:

“We worry about having good donkeys and horses because we know that good comes from good; however, a healthy man doesn’t refuse to marry a sick woman if she has money. It’s money that weakens the race. There’s no wonder if it declines, since the bad crosses paths with the good”<sup>38</sup>.

The eugenicist idea that pretended to be new, in the end, had nothing modern about it except in its materialist aspect. Materialism is present in all its conceptions “that seek to elevate ‘eugenic superhumanism’ to the status of a 20th century gospel”<sup>39</sup>. And to try to lump political philosophies and Lutheran religions into the same unacceptable bag, he concludes saying “that the fanatics of eugenics are divided between the supporters of a superhumanism, materialist in philosophy and communist in politics, and the idealist reformers coming out from the religious extravagances in which Lutheran evangelism is dissolved today”<sup>40</sup>.

On both sides of the Atlantic, Catholics were united in the same faith and in the fight against eugenics. In both countries (more so in Brazil than, despite everything, in Portugal) the Catholic Church felt the pressure of the modernity challenges in which the whole eugenicist scientific and biopolitical project was embedded. There or here, the church would become an obstacle to the institutionalization of eugenics, due to the social power it represented. The French-influenced neo-Lamarckist paradigm prevailed in both countries, with the specificities of each one, more focused on the promotion of hygiene and disease prevention<sup>41</sup>.

## Conclusion

It is undeniable that during the first half of the 20th century, hygienist and eugenicist conceptions, as well as issues related to race, clashed in

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<sup>38</sup> Idem. *Ibidem*.

<sup>39</sup> Idem. *Ibidem*.

<sup>40</sup> Idem. *Ibidem*.

<sup>41</sup> STEPAN, Nancy Leys. «Eugenia no Brasil, 1917-1940» In HOCHMAN, Gilberto; ARMUS, Diego (Orgs). *Cuidar, Controlar, Curar. Ensaios Históricos sobre Saúde e Doença na América Latina e Caribe* [online]. Fiocruz, Rio de Janeiro, pp. 330-391; WEBER, op. cit., pp. 205-217; TURDA; GILLETTE, op. cit.; PEREIRA, op. cit., Eugenia em Portugal?, pp. 531-60; PEREIRA, op. cit., Darwin em Portugal... CLEMINSON, op. cit., Between Germanic and Latin eugenics..., pp.73-91.

Portugal. Eugenics, as an institutionalized practice, was never accepted in its negative aspects, but it had many persistent defenders. Its defense as a theory and practice in Portugal, as in most countries, was based on a conception of the decadence of the “race”, and its progressive degeneration, requiring urgent responses to reverse the situation, in other words, the seriousness of the situation (decadence) demanded biopolitical responses only within the reach of eugenics. Thus, the question posed does not aspire to disguise the undisguisable: “racial” superiority, on the one hand, and the imperative need of people, who want to be strong and healthy, to do whatever possible to create “good generations”. Therefore, within this scientific and social framework, in which hygienist, eugenicist and racist proposals intersected, the movement in favor of eugenics as the savior of “good offspring” developed in Portugal.

However, ideas with social, scientific, or pseudo-scientific implications always need institutions, in other words, a culture that is favorable or unfavorable to their acceptance and dissemination. In turn, the societies in which these ideas are disseminated are far from being mere passive receptacles. This is what happened to some extent in Portugal, as a country that received eugenic theories, which became conditioned by the institutional conditions (norms, rules, laws, practices) imposed at that time and period to their reception.

Although we can follow the moments of reception and dissemination of the eugenics movement in Portugal, there will always be a grey side to this journey, which is constantly being illuminated by new researches. This is also what we have endeavored to do, to surprise the path of eugenics in a very specific political and social time. In this sense, it was easy to see that, as we progressed through the 20th century, eugenics was gaining favor, especially among a small elite of doctors, university professors, anthropologists, and scientists. However, not even during its heyday in the 1930s did eugenics manage to establish itself as a central idea in Portuguese society. In other words, eugenics never became a scientific, political, cultural or even religious issue in Portugal, forcing the main areas of public debate (magazines, newspapers, political parties, parliaments) to come out in support and/or opposition. The debate existed and has been analyzed in detail by various studies, but it was confined to a very restricted circle of new protagonists who, due to a lack of scale and audience, found it very difficult to break out of the shell from which they sought to disseminate their ideas.

Therefore, we do not find eugenics outside of academic circles and specialized medical newspapers and, although we can find some of its defenders in political or academic positions of any kind of relevance, they never found the political conditions to mobilize their ideas towards institutionalization. The influences and knowledge of what was being practiced in other countries, particularly in France, Germany, England, and Brazil, were extensive. But they all were a result of a set of ideas that, although Germanic traits remained very evident in figures such as Eusébio Tamagnini and many of those who founded the SPEE with him, it was always the environmentalist aspect that set the tone for eugenics in Portugal.

The social, political, and institutional conditions were therefore lacking for the advocates of more negative eugenics to succeed. It wasn't for lack of endeavor that this did not happen. In 1934, Professor Eusébio Tamagnini, in his inaugural lecture at the University of Coimbra, seemed to believe in the power of eugenics as a mean of ethnic purification. However, these ideas, apparently mobilizing, did not find the necessary cultural, political, and ideological broth in Portuguese society to make them take off. Neither during the First Republic (1910-1926), nor in the context of the Military Dictatorship (1926-1933), nor the more favorable environment of the creation of Salazar's "New Man" (1933-1968), did any project for national regeneration that brought with it hereditary eugenic solutions gain dominant prominence in the main political-ideological movements.

National regeneration on both the left and on the right never placed the issue of eugenics at the center of the debate, as happened elsewhere, which was confined, while maintaining a certain tension, to university and public health institutions. The existing alternative models of national regeneration and the role of the Catholic Church in defending environmental and social hygiene practices seem to have been strong enough barriers to prevent the institutionalization of hereditary eugenics practices. The strong neo-Lamarckist tradition of environmental public hygiene, the weight that the Catholic Church had in institutions linked to social protection and public health, became so dominant that, after the Second World War, Germanic eugenics, which was so popular with certain figures in Portugal, ceased to be a topic and, in some cases, its defense was even erased from some biographies.

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