

Marius Turda. 2024. *În căutarea românului perfect. Specific național, degenerare rasială și selecție socială în România modernă* [In search of the perfect Romanian. National specificity, racial degeneration, and social selection in modern Romania]. Iași: Polirom.

Book review by

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The reviewed book follows in the footsteps of *Eugenics and Nation in Early Twentieth Century Hungary* (Palgrave 2014), translated into Romanian with the title “Războiul sfânt” al rasei. Eugenia și protecția națiunii în Ungaria, 1900–1919 (Școala Ardeleană Publishing 2022), for which Marius Turdu received the Nicolae Bălcescu award from the Romanian Academy.^[1] I remember the words of Sorin Antohi at the launch of the book in Bucharest: when will a book about eugenics in Romania come out? Here it is!

In previous works, Marius Turda demonstrated that eugenics and biopolitics were global phenomena, and that there were eugenic currents and programmes, whether American, German, or South American, which established scientific racism. This work, as the title indicates, deals with the specific Romanian case. Turda proposes a novel method for understanding and explaining the foundations of Romanian nationalism in the years 1880–1950. The argument advanced in the paper is that a eugenic and biopolitical culture also existed, which established scientific racism in Romania. The aim of this culture was to protect the Romanian race or nation.

The study of Romanian eugenics was prompted by Maria Bucur in her work *Eugenics and Modernization in Interwar Romania*, published in 2002. Turda’s work is a valuable addition to the field, as it draws attention to the direct links between eugenics and biopolitical thought on the one hand, and the measures taken against Jews and Roma during the Holocaust in Romania on the other. Furthermore, it explores the re-invention of eugenics after 1947.

Today, the idea of creating a perfect human seems like a utopia to many of us. But at the beginning of the last century, it was not. A significant number of scientists and intellectuals believed it possible to improve the human race through social selection and the protection of biological capital. This belief fostered a robust dialogue between scientists and politicians, guided by a mutual need for support and recognition. And yet, as we look at the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) today, we might ask ourselves: what is AI if not our modern attempt to create the perfect human – complete with all the flaws and biases we once sought to eliminate?

I will review the book from the perspective of the relationship between history and memory. This history has so far been silenced. Eugenics, scientific racism, and Romanian biopolitics have been excluded from studies on Romanian nationalism and the Holocaust. The argument was that they had a very low impact and enjoyed little popularity at the time. Is that so? The novelty, variety, and overwhelming number of historical sources cited by Turda will shock the reader, emphasising its exact opposite!

Until now, “scientific” research and biopolitical and racist thinking produced by so many important Romanian anthropologists, demographers, doctors, ethnographers, journalists, jurists, priests, serologists, sociologists, and statisticians was swept under the rug of national history. Turda exposes this farce by showing how rooted in Romanian nationalism it was and, how this, in turn, was legitimised via the results of this research.

1 A shorter version of this book review by Adrian-Nicolae Furtună was published in Romanian in *Sociologie Românească* 22 (2): 156–162. <https://doi.org/10.33788/sr.22.2.9>.

I will look at how the names of some of the most important eugenicists and strategists of Romanian racism were able to seep through the politics of memory filter, emerging “clean” and laundered onto the map of national memory today. To this end, I will highlight the research of several prominent scholars whose work is widely discussed by Turda. I will then link their names to current memorial practices.

In 1942, theology professor Liviu Stan published the seminal work *Race and Religion*. Turda confirms that “For Liviu Stan, professor at the Andreian Theological Academy in Sibiu, blood was not only the ‘essential (biological) physical characteristic of the race’, but it was the very ‘carrier of the race.’” He stated that blood was “the element that maintains it; the most important cause of the persistence of a breed” (Turda 2024, 93). In his 1941 article “Racism towards the Gypsies”, Liviu Stan clearly expressed his views on the purity of the Romanian race, stating that “we must affirm the racist principles towards this heterogeneous, toxic, dissolving and destructive group as well” (Stan 1941, 1).

The way in which Liviu Stan’s name is presented to the current generation is clear. On 20–21 September 2023, on the fifth anniversary of his death, the Patriarchy of the Romanian Orthodox Church organised an extensive scientific symposium in his honour. It was entitled “Canonical Theology and Church Law in Orthodoxy: The Contribution of Father Professor Liviu Stan, Ph.D. (1910–1973)” (Dumitrașcu 2023). Numerous Orthodox press articles lauded the contribution of Professor Liviu Stan to theological studies and, by extension, to Romanian culture.

Turda definitively shows that the history of scientific racism in Romania cannot be discussed without acknowledging the pivotal role of Sabin Manuilă, director of the Central Institute of Statistics and a close friend of Ion Antonescu. During the Holocaust in Romania, his position and involvement in the “Roma problem” were very clear: the “... Gypsy problem is the most important, acute and serious problem of Romania. [...] The Gypsy mixture in Romanian blood is the most dysgenic influence affecting our race” (Turda 2024, 220).

Sabin Manuilă’s name is still prominent in Romanian society. In the village of Sâmbăteni in Arad County, where Sabin Manuilă was born, the school in the locality is named after him. An article in the *Glasul Aradului* newspaper, entitled “The History of the ‘Sabin Manuilă’ General School in Sâmbăteni” proves so: “One former student, of whom the school is particularly proud, is Sabin Manuilă (1894–1964). At the request of the director, Prof. Cornelia Foster, the school was renamed ‘Sabin Manuilă’ [Sâmbăteni general school] on 1 September 2008, to honour this great man. The article provides comprehensive details of S. Manuilă’s scientific contributions as a doctor, statistician, demographer and eugenicist at both national and international levels (*Glasul Aradului* 2013).

Iuliu Moldovan was without doubt the most prominent of the Romanian eugenicists. He was Director of the Institute of Hygiene and Social Hygiene and author of the work *Biopolitics* (Biopolitica), in which he stated: “Natural and social selection through the external physical and social environment retains its overwhelming importance for the course of biological evolution. They will have to be helped, not in the sense of brutally suppressing the defective, but in the sense of eliminating them from procreation and giving maximum assistance to those with superior biological qualities” (Moldovan 1926, 18). Marius Turda provides a comprehensive overview of Moldovan’s contributions to the development of Romanian

eugenics and biopolitical thought, highlighting the pivotal role he played in the adoption of biopolitics and eugenics as state policy. On 8 October 1943, Moldovan was appointed head of the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Nation's Biological Capital, under the authority of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers led by Ion Antonescu.

The Institute of Public Health in Cluj-Napoca is currently named after Iuliu Moldovan.

Other examples include Gheorghe Marinescu, the founder of the Romanian school of neurology; Constantin I. Parhon, the founder of the Romanian school of endocrinology; and the hygienist and anthropologist Petru Râmneanțu.

In 1935, in the article “Eugenics and Romanianism”, Gheorghe Marinescu stated that eugenics is “the basis, the foundation of a people”. For Marinescu, “a people” is “a synthesis: race + culture. Environmental hygiene and education are of great importance, but they cannot achieve anything if something is not done against degeneration.” Turda shows that, against a background of discussions on eugenic sterilisation, the Society of Eugenics and the Study of Heredity was created in Bucharest in May 1935, under Marinescu's leadership (Turda 2024, 66).

Today, a street in an exclusive neighbourhood of Bucharest is called Gheorghe Marinescu Street.

Constantin I. Parhon was president of the Union of Eugenic Societies in Romania and President of the International Federation of Latin Eugenics Societies. Marius Turda proves that Parhon had already applied therapeutic sterilisation as early as 1936 to a patient with sexual impulses and to two patients with epilepsy (Turda 2024, 155–156). After political regime change at the end of the war, he continued his activity, becoming a founding member of the Romanian Association for the Strengthening of Ties with the Soviet Union. In 1948, he was invited to write the introduction to the first work about the human experiments carried out by Nazi doctors in the concentration camps of Auschwitz, Buchenwald, and Dachau. He was a key supporter of the “construction of socialism” and participated in the conference “New Conceptions in Biology. Miciurin's Soviet creative Darwinism” organised by Vasile Mârza, Minister of Health.

Currently, the National Institute of Endocrinology in Romania is named after Constantin I. Parhon.

Petru Râmneanțu was one of the scientists who tried to prove through serological research that the Szeklers and Csangos are in fact Hungarianised Romanians. His argument was well received by authorities at the time. Turda shows that Râmneanțu's research was based on two serological concepts: Hirszfeld's “biochemical race index” and the “gene-specific blood index” proposed by the Austrian mathematician Sigmund Wellisch (Turda 2024, 107)

Currently, a street in Timisoara is named after him.

I conclude this short list with the physiologist Nicolae C. Paulescu, about whom Turda shows that his activity in the field of science “does not prevent him from being classified as an anti-Semite and racist” (Turda 2024, 64) Paulescu published the work *The Degeneration of the Jewish Race* in 1928.

A monitoring report by the National Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania – Elie Wiesel (INSHR-EW) reveals that in 2022 Cluj-Napoca City Hall unveiled a proposal to name a street in the city after Paulescu. However, the project was ultimately thwarted following various interventions (INSHR-EW 2022, 15). His name had already become a part of the national memory long before this initiative. The National Institute of Diabetes, Nutrition, and Metabolic Diseases in Bucharest, a post-secondary nursing school in Râmnicu Sărat, and two streets, one in Bucharest and the other in Timisoara, are already called “Prof. Dr. Nicolae Paulescu”. Furthermore, the monitoring report indicated that on 21 July 2021, the Romanian Academy in collaboration with the “Bartoc” Cultural Foundation organised a commemorative event to mark the centenary of the discovery of insulin. The central focus of the event was the unveiling of a bas-relief sculpture of Nicolae Paulescu. Two days after the event, the title of an article in an online newspaper informed the public: “The eminent scientist Nicolae Paulescu, the Romanian who saves 10% of the world’s population from death every day, honoured at the Romanian Academy 100 years after the discovery of insulin. The event featured an impressive testimony, the unveiling of a bas-relief, a collection of medals, and a commemoration of the anniversary” (Anghel 2021). The participation of the Secretary of State in the Ministry of Culture, Irina Cajal, who is Jewish, prompted a group of intellectuals to react in the press, demanding her resignation. The presence of Mr Aurel Vainer, honorary president of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Romania, also elicited a strong reaction. The president of the Romanian Academy, Aurel Pop, stated that the two participants had been “extraordinarily complimentary”. Furthermore, the president of the Romanian Academy elucidated the rationale behind the event: “It seems to me a fair step when compared to the epochal scientific discovery that a Romanian made a hundred years ago, he has primacy, even if the Nobel data recorded two other scientists” (INSHR-EW 2022, 19).

At first glance, Marius Turda’s work does not appear to be a work of cultural memory, but rather a history of how ideas about race and its improvement influenced and shaped Romanian society and determined the debate about national specificity between 1880 and 1950. An examination of select paradigms shows the endurance of certain foundational figures in the national consciousness. These figures endure without any taint of their racist, antisemitic, or anti-Roma activities; instead, they are recognised as founding figures of the nation, defined by their academic research. It is important to note that each figure can be viewed critically and ranked by the extent to which their activities in the medical field were intertwined with that of anthropology, which prompted ideas and, ultimately, biopolitical action. The explanation for why these figures persist in the canon of Romanian national memory is provided by the author himself: “Significant Romanian eugenicists, including Iuliu Moldovan, Aurel Voinea, Grigore I. Odobescu, Gheorghe Marinescu, Gheorghe Banu, Liviu Stan, Iordache Făcăoaru and Sabin Manuilă, positioned the Romanian peasant family at the core of the nation’s eugenic and biopolitical transformation. The Romanian peasant family was synonymous with the Romanian nation” (Turda 2024, 16).

The historiographical preconception that the circulation of scientific racism ideas reduced in the interwar period was also encouraged by the International Commission for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania, which drafted its Final Report in 2004. A close inspection of the document reveals that the term “eugenics” is mentioned on a mere three occasions. The exclusion of the contribution of eugenics and biopolitical ideas to the formation and strengthening of Romanian nationalism led to a lack of in-depth understanding of the decisions taken by the Romanian state towards Jews and Roma in the

early 1940s. This paucity of understanding has, over time, contributed to the formation of collective memory surrounding the persecution of both Jewish and Romani communities. While the memory of the Holocaust of Jews was clearly subscribed to racist state policy, the historiography regarding the Roma presented them as second-rate victims, portrayed as persecuted on social criteria, at most ethnic in the cultural sense: “The selection and deportation took into account only those Roma who led a ‘Gypsy’ way of life” (Friling, Ioanid, and Ionescu 2004, 231).

The Roma deported to Transnistria had been designated by the state as “useless to society” or as people “who cannot justify their existence”. The rationale behind the selection of only 25,000 Roma for deportation to Transnistria, out of a total population of approximately 230,000 Roma residing in Romania during that period, remains ambiguous. The chapter “Roma and ‘Romanians by blood’” – an extension of an article co-authored with Turda in 2021, “Roma and the Question of Ethnic Origin in Romania during the Holocaust” – demonstrates how both categories of Roma who were deported, that is, all nomadic Roma and all those Roma who had a criminal record or “could not justify their existence”, were in fact eugenic categories. Roma who identified as “Romanians” and who were regarded as “good” could be retained and amalgamated with the remainder of the national biological body. Conversely, those deemed “undesirable” or “dysgenic” were to be deported to Transnistria. Those who survived in Transnistria were to bear the stigma of being deemed “useless to society” and of passing this on to their descendants.

Turda’s work invites us to consider analytically the internal causes that led to the Holocaust. Moreover, it demonstrates that the conceptualisation of a eugenic society did not cease with the Holocaust but rather persisted during the communist era through the implementation of a pronatalist policy, manifesting as “non-racist eugenics”. This work contributes to the understanding of cultural figures from the interwar period who espoused eugenic ideas and proposals, as well as to social justice and the process of reconciliation with the historical past. This is no mere act of historical amnesia but rather encourages a process of introspection and critical examination of the past. It is an endeavour to learn from the past, to understand the conditions that led to abhorrent deeds, and to take action to ensure that such atrocities are never repeated.

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