

# EUGENICS AND SOCIAL DEMOCRACY: OR, HOW THE EUROPEAN LEFT TRIED TO ELIMINATE THE ‘WEEDS’ FROM ITS NATIONAL GARDENS

---

*Véronique Mottier and Natalia Gerodetti*

The ‘science’ of eugenics emerged during the second half of the nineteenth century, with the aim of assisting nation states in formulating social policies which would improve the ‘quality’ of the population. The emergence of modern health and social policies from the turn of the twentieth century provided the institutional conditions for translating eugenic rhetoric into a policy programme. Nowadays, eugenics tends to be popularly associated with Nazi Germany, where large-scale experiments in social engineering included forced sterilisations and ‘euthanasia’ of ‘degenerate’ persons. In truth, however, eugenic ideas found support across the political spectrum, including amongst socialists and anarchists. Whilst feminists were to be found on both sides of the debate - supporting and opposing eugenics - most opposition came from liberals, who rejected state intervention in private life, and churches, particularly the Catholic Church. Eugenicists called for scientifically-founded state intervention to prevent further degeneration of the diseased national body. Social democrat reformers were amongst the pioneers of eugenic ‘science’ as well as policy practices in Europe. A number of eugenic policies such as forced sterilisation of ‘degenerates’ were strongly promoted by the Left and were first applied in countries such as Switzerland and Sweden. Other eugenic policies included education programmes, non-voluntary incarceration in psychiatric clinics, removal of children from parental homes, prohibition to marry, as well as measures that specifically targeted vagrants, ‘gypsies’, and, more generally, socially deviant groups such as unmarried mothers, ‘sexual deviants’, or people with physical or mental impairments. The emerging welfare state also added an additional motive to that of preventing degeneracy: limiting public expenditure. Indeed, rapidly expanding welfare institutions increasingly targeted the ‘inferior’ categories of the national population who became the main recipients of the growing welfare system. Limiting the number of ‘weeds’ in the national garden therefore appeared as a rational means of reducing welfare costs, which many social democrats as well as feminists supported enthusiastically. Recent developments in the area of genetics have not only returned collective preoccupations with heredity to the debate on the future of national welfare systems, but have also revived anxieties about past eugenic experiences. Against this backdrop, there are important lessons to be drawn from the role of social democracy in the European experience of eugenics. The aim of this article is to explore the connections between eugenics and social democracy,

and to raise a number of issues concerning these links which are, given contemporary ethical concerns around the new human genetics, of continuing importance today. While focusing on Switzerland in particular, the Swiss case will be contextualised by eugenic experiences in other European countries, such as the UK, Germany and Scandinavia.

## EUGENICS, SEXUALITY, AND THE WELFARE STATE

A series of prominent media scandals concerning Sweden and Switzerland made 1998 an important year in the history of European eugenics. In the Swedish case, a study which examined sterilisation policies generated considerable interest and concern throughout Europe's popular and scientific press.<sup>1</sup> Although social historians had been previously aware of the practice, the media and public alike were shocked to discover that Sweden, renowned for its strong welfare state and attendant protection of vulnerable social groups, had engaged in exclusionary practices such as eugenic sterilisations until as recently as 1973. In the Swiss case, 1998 saw the publication of a government report on the notorious *Kinder der Landstrasse* ('Children of the Country Lanes') programme,<sup>2</sup> which officially confirmed claims about the forced removal of 'gypsy' children from their biological families that had been reported in the Swiss press as early as 1972, resulting in public outrage. This government-approved programme, which aimed to eliminate vagrancy, had been set up by the federal agency *Pro Juventute* and ran from 1926 to 1973. Its explicit aim was, in the words of its founding father Alfred Siegfried, to prevent the Yenish (the main group of 'gypsies' within Switzerland) from 'reproducing without restraint and bringing new generations of degenerate and abnormal children into the world'; it therefore sought the effective eradication of Yenish culture. In pursuit of these eugenic aims, *Pro Juventute* removed over six hundred Yenish children from their parents, to be raised in orphanages, foster families and mental institutions - an experience which the Prime Minister, Ruth Dreifuss, described in 1999 as 'one of the darkest chapters in modern Swiss history'. Coming, as it did, on the heels of the 'Nazi gold' scandal, which had revealed that Swiss banks profited from Nazi crimes, it further shook the foundations of Swiss identity, in particular, its (self-)image as a neutral nation driven by humanitarian concerns, whose political institutions of direct democracy and federalism allow for the expression and protection of cultural 'differences' within its borders.

Eugenic discourses in the first half of the twentieth century comprised three central elements, namely ideas about selective breeding, the claim of the physical and mental decline of the population, and that of the hereditary character of mental illnesses, all of which directly affected ideas about gender, sexuality and notions of normalcy. Thus, as a combination of science and social movement, eugenics provided an analysis of what was wrong with modern society, how this occurred and by what means it could be remedied. In the face of mounting threats and anxieties about 'degeneration', 'race suicide'

1. Maja Runcis, 'Sterilization in the Swedish Welfare State', English summary of doctoral thesis, University of Stockholm, 1998.

2. Walter Leimgruber, Thomas Meier, Roger Sablonier, *Das Hilfswerk für die Kinder der Landstrasse*, Bern, Bundesarchive Dossier, 9, 1998.

and the threat of ‘unruly sexualities’, eugenics constituted a comprehensive and rationalised programme of social engineering. Despite occasional and fervent opposition, it was to become an influential practice, due to its overlap with other social and political concerns. Indeed, in the context of accelerating industrialisation and urbanisation processes, the rapidly growing urban population appeared as potentially destabilising to the public order whilst orderly, healthy and prolific citizens came to be seen as a source of wealth for expanding nation-states.<sup>3</sup>

The modern nation-state has emerged, to use Zygmunt Bauman’s formulation, through a ‘quest for order’; its aim was to create an orderly society through the twin reigns of science and reason.<sup>4</sup> Hobbes’s discovery that order was not natural led to the notion that social and political order needs to be constructed through the design, engineering and management of existence, combined with the mastery and subordination of nature.<sup>5</sup> Eugenics offered the hope of a scientifically grounded elimination of all sorts of social ills and disorderly conduct, through policies that would carefully regulate the reproductive sexuality of the population. In Great Britain, the birthplace of eugenics, such preoccupations were clearly intertwined with the demands of the colonial empire, and much anxiety focused on the supposedly degenerative characteristics of colonised, racial ‘others’ and the perils of interracial reproduction. However, despite widespread support for eugenics amongst leading intellectuals, the strong influence of liberalism in the UK, in particular the distrust of state intervention in private life, put a brake upon the translation of eugenic ideas into actual policy practice, at least at a national level.<sup>6</sup> The political context was more favourable elsewhere in Europe. Countries such as Sweden and Switzerland - interestingly, neither of them colonial powers at the time - pioneered and applied eugenic policies to an extent that British eugenicists could only dream of. Notably, far from being associated with any particular political perspective, eugenic thinking drew upon a wide spectrum of political philosophy. Socialist eugenicists placed great hope in the theory as a social technology which could alleviate social problems such as poverty and alcoholism, especially in combination with the eugenic education of citizens. Socialist versions of eugenics became part of the intellectual and political project of European social democracy.<sup>7</sup>

## THE SWISS ‘DREAM OF ORDER’

Switzerland’s involvement in, and development of, eugenic policies and thinking has, in the aftermath of the 1998 media debate, become the subject of renewed interest. Eugenicist discourses were highly influential in Switzerland from the end of the nineteenth century up to the end of the Second World War, and Switzerland was at the forefront of eugenic science and practice.<sup>8</sup> Swiss scientists made significant contributions to the international scientific discourse of eugenics, while important eugenicist practices and policies were pioneered and implemented in the country. As elsewhere, eugenic scientific

3. See Robert A. Nye, ‘The Discovery of ‘Sexuality’ at the Turn of the Century’, in R. Nye (ed) *Sexuality*, Oxford, O.U.P, 1999.

4. Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1989.

5. *Ibid.*, p7.

6. Desmond King and Randall Hansen, ‘Experts at work: state autonomy, social learning and eugenic sterilisation in 1930s Britain’, *British Journal of Political Science*, 29 (1999): 77-107.

7. Diane Paul has pointed this out some 20 years ago. ‘Eugenics and the Left’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 45, 4 (1984): 567-590.

8. On the Swiss case, see also Véronique Mottier, ‘From Welfare to Social Exclusion: Eugenic Social Policies and the Swiss National Order’, in D. Howarth & J. Torfing (eds), *Discourse Theory in European Politics: Identity, Politics and Governance*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005; and Véronique Mottier, ‘Narratives of National Identity: Sexuality, Race, and the Swiss ‘Dream of Order’’, *Swiss Journal of Sociology*, 26, 3 (2000): 533-558.

9. Alex Schwank, 'Der rassenhygienische (bzw. eugenische) Diskurs in der schweizerischen Medizin des 20. Jahrhunderts', in S. Weigel and B. Erdle (eds), *Fünfzig Jahre danach. Zur Nachgeschichte des Nationalsozialismus*, Zürich, Hochschulverlag ETH, 1996.

10. Urs Aeschbacher, 'Psychiatrie und 'Rassenhygiene'', in A. Mattioli (ed), *Antisemitismus in der Schweiz 1948-1960*, Zürich, Orell Füssli Verlag, 1998, p291.

11. Lucy Bland, 'Introduction', in L. Bland and L. Doan (eds), *Sexology Uncensored. The Documents of Sexual Science*, Cambridge, Polity, 1998, p13.

12. Christoph Keller, *Der Schädelvermesser. Otto Schlaginhaufen – Anthropologe und Rassenhygieniker. Eine biographische Reportage*, Zürich, Limmat Verlag, 1995.

13. Auguste Forel, *Le vrai socialisme de l'avenir*, Lausanne, Imprimerie Populaire, 1925, p15, our translation.

14. Auguste Forel, *Le rôle de l'hypocrisie, de la bêtise et de l'ignorance dans la morale contemporaine*, Lausanne, Libre Pensée Internationale, 1916.

15. Forel, *Le vrai socialisme*, op. cit., p23, our translation.

discourse constituted an extensive field in Switzerland, covering a number of disciplines and authors. In the Swiss context, the terms 'racial hygiene' and 'eugenics' were used interchangeably, the former concept, in fact, being the most widely used.<sup>9</sup> The most important sites of racial hygiene discourse in Switzerland were psychiatry and sexology, and amongst the most prominent Swiss 'degeneracy experts'<sup>10</sup> was the psychiatrist and sexologist Auguste Forel (1848-1931). The writings of Forel can be considered as representative of wider eugenic rhetoric, although most of the actual implementation of eugenic practices was left to his disciples as he withdrew from public life after a stroke in 1917.

At the Sex Reform Congress in London in 1929, Forel was cited as one of the founding fathers of sexology, along with the British sexologist Havelock Ellis and the German doctor Iwan Bloch.<sup>11</sup> Forel was also a leading pioneer of eugenics both nationally and internationally. He was elected a Member of the Advisory Board of the International Federation of Eugenic Organisations<sup>12</sup> and Honorary President of the World League of Sexual Reform in 1930. His most important book, *La question sexuelle*, first published in 1905, was translated into numerous languages. His enduring prestige within Switzerland is reflected in the place of honour accorded to his portrait, which until recently graced the (highest value) 1000 francs banknote.

In addition to his psychiatric and sexological activities, Forel was a social reformer and a member of the Swiss Social Democrat Party from 1916. His progressive campaigns included calls for sexual education in schools, women's voting rights, abstinence from alcoholic drinks, and pacifism. The science of eugenics, he argued, would provide the impetus for social, moral and racial purification. Rejecting the 'false patriotism' of militaristic capitalist nationalism, Forel viewed the construction of a social and national order based on the scientific management of reproduction by the welfare state as a moral duty to the future national community:<sup>13</sup>

The regulation of procreation through appropriate means is a moral task. It is necessary for the hygiene of our race. Only this, combined with the elimination of narcotic poisons, will be able to block the increasing degeneration of our race, and bring us a better future. We owe this to the progress, happiness and health of the future generations, for whose quality we are responsible.<sup>14</sup>

The nation was at risk, Forel suggested, from a hereditary degeneration of the race which was not only physical but also moral. In this narrative of danger and decay, individuals with flawed hereditary dispositions were attributed roles as victims as well as agents of degeneracy. Indeed, for Forel, it was unfair to hold people responsible for having flawed hereditary dispositions. In his view, the construction of the social order should therefore not centre on the management of deviants, but rather on the eugenic prevention of degeneracy, an argument articulated in 'The True Socialism of the Future'.<sup>15</sup>

Forel's view that the social order was based on hereditary dispositions and was under threat, combined with a traditional social-democratic belief in the redeeming powers of education.<sup>16</sup> While 'only a healthy selection of the race' could improve the biological stock of the nation, his belief was that this should be combined with active education campaigns based on science and reason: 'Let Science enlighten our sexual life freely and openly; then, the hypocrisy of normal people will cease, and that of abnormal people can be recognised in time and damage be prevented'.<sup>17</sup> Given the importance of sexual selection for the regulation of procreation, Forel strongly promoted policies of sexual education. In his view, it was through selective, scientifically-informed procreation that the boundaries around the national order were to be established and maintained. It was crucial, he argued, to teach young people about the consequences of having sexual relations with 'inferior' partners, and about the corresponding necessity of gathering information on the hereditary background of potential spouses. 'Each fiancée has the right and, in the interest of the future children, the holy duty,' Forel wrote, 'to know the sexual antecedents of their future spouse'.<sup>18</sup>

Within Forel's conception of the social order, women occupied an ambivalent position. On the one hand, he portrayed women as political subjects and promoted political equality between the genders, especially on the issue of women's voting rights, a progressive view in a nation that only extended the franchise to women in 1971. On the other hand, the reproductive bodies of women were a particular source of eugenic anxiety. Given their reproductive responsibilities to the nation, Forel saw women as particularly important targets for the eugenic education and state regulation that he believed was called for. 'Well-informed and superior women will be the ones, I expect, who will participate most energetically and most successfully in human selection', he postulated.<sup>19</sup> Women's bodily 'instincts of procreation', which he considered 'much stronger in woman than in man', were combined with the will to 'give herself passively', to be 'conquered, mastered and subjugated'.<sup>20</sup> Female identity was thus constructed in ambivalent terms, as women were positioned both as political subjects, and as sexual objects within the social order.

Despite their lack of voting rights and exclusion from most public functions, Swiss women did have scope for social and political agency, especially amongst the educated middle classes. In the slowly emerging Swiss welfare state, women's philanthropic activities played a central role in the provision of social support and the exercise of social control. Regarding eugenics, they made important contributions to cultural understandings of womanhood and helped to popularise these, particularly in the domain of mother and baby care. Female doctors, as well as women who performed public duties in the philanthropic organisations which provided the personnel of the eugenic marriage advice clinics from the 1930s onwards, increasingly targeted mothers as guardians of the health of children, linking individual care with the collective obligation of 'race improvement'. As welfare services were at

16. Auguste Forel, *La morale en soi*, Lausanne, Administration de la libre pensée, 1910.

17. Forel, *Le rôle de l'hypocrisie*, op. cit.

18. *Ibid.*, p12, our translation.

19. Auguste Forel, *La question sexuelle exposée aux adultes cultivés*, Paris, Steinheil, 1905, p575, our translation.

20. Auguste Forel, 'The Sexual Question', in L. Bland and L. Doan (eds), *Sexology Uncensored. The Documents of Sexual Science*, Cambridge, Polity, [1906] 1998, p29.

21. Nadja Ramsauer, « *Verwahrlost* » : *Kindswegnahmen und die Entstehung der Jugendfürsorge im schweizerischen Sozialstaat 1900-1945*, Zürich, Chronos, 2000, pp197-198.

22. See Anna Grossenreiter et al., '... und wird dazu angehalten, einen sittlich einwandfreien Lebenswandel zu führen.', in F. Jenny et al (eds), *Orte der Geschlechtergeschichte*, Zürich, Chronos, 1994; Regina Wecker, 'Eugenik – individueller Ausschluss und nationaler Konsens', in S. Guex et al (eds), *Krisen und Stabilisierung. Die Schweiz in der Zwischenkriegszeit*, Zürich, Chronos, 1998; Gilles Jeanmonod and Geneviève Heller, 'Eugénisme et contexte socio-politique: l'exemple de l'adoption d'une loi sur la stérilisation des handicapés et malades mentaux dans le canton de Vaud en 1928', *Revue d'histoire suisse*, 50 (2000): 20-44; Natalia Gerodetti, 'From Science to Social Technology : Eugenics and Politics in Twentieth-Century Switzerland', *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society*, 13, 1 (2006): 59-88.

23. See for instance, Walter Leimgruber et al, *Das Hilfswerk für die Kinder der Landstrasse. Historische Studie aufgrund der Akten der Stiftung Pro Juventute im Schweizerischen Bundesarchiv*, Bern, Bundesarchiv.

first largely administered by local philanthropic associations, these changing cultural perceptions of motherhood fed into the increasing scrutiny given to parental practices. For example, the prominent female doctor Imboden-Kaiser advocated an education programme which would instil in mothers a 'sense of reproductive responsibility', further developing Forel's principle of rational sexuality, while also calling for obligatory medical examinations and 'marriage ability attestations'.<sup>21</sup>

Collective anxieties centred on the various social categories that were seen to constitute hereditary 'threats' to the Swiss nation: criminals, prostitutes, alcoholics, 'immoral' people, the mentally ill, haemophiliacs, people with tuberculosis, drug addicts, 'gypsies', and vagrants. It should be noted that the distinctions between labels such as alcoholism, unsteadiness, sexual promiscuity, dissoluteness, or squandermania were often rather hazy. The 'mentally ill' were a particularly loose category which could include vagrants, people of 'weak morals', delinquents, and unmarried mothers (who were considered morally defective since they had clearly had sex outside of wedlock). Eugen Bleuler, the eugenicist Swiss psychiatrist who is best known for coining the term schizophrenia thus considered 'mental illness' less as a medical condition than as a social categorisation which rendered the holder socially (and economically) incapable. Boundaries between medical diagnosis and moral values were, at best, fluid in eugenic discourse, and they completely dissolved in concepts such as moral feeble-mindedness.<sup>22</sup>

In accordance with the vision of a 'less degenerate' future, much of the Swiss eugenic effort were not only directed at managing those adults deemed 'unfit', but crucially was also aimed at the young, as representatives of the next generation. The removal of Yewish as well as other children from their families into foster or residential care, educational interventions and follow-up care from guardianship offices or educational authorities attest to that.<sup>23</sup> Sterilisation and castration were also practiced and constituted the most radical eugenic practices in the Swiss context.<sup>24</sup> Forel constantly called for the sterilisation of the above-mentioned 'degenerate' categories of the population by the state, as a rational measure to prevent their reproduction. He perceived this task to be all the more urgent as he considered these sexualised 'others' and sexual 'perverts' - as well as women in general - as 'more sexual', and thus representing a particular sexual threat to the nation. As director of the world-renowned psychiatric clinic Burghölzli in Zürich between 1879 and 1898, he put his ideas into practice by pioneering the very first sterilisations without consent within German-speaking nations in 1886.<sup>25</sup>

Forel combined a focus on degeneracy with a narrative on the nature of modern civilisation. As he put it: 'In the past, in the good old days, incapable and inadequate persons were treated differently from today. Enormous numbers of pathological brains, which damaged society, were simply executed, hanged or beheaded; the process was short and insofar successful, as these people could no longer reproduce or spoil society with their degenerate germs'.<sup>26</sup> Forel saw the modern national order as characterised by the absence

of natural selection through fighting and execution of degenerate individuals. Consequently, he called for 'artificial sterilisation' by the state to 'decrease the numbers of inferior individuals'.

Thus, the construction of the Swiss nation was at least partly founded on what could be described as the Swiss 'dream of order'.<sup>27</sup> The social and political order was seen to be 'troubled' by various categories of 'disorderly' ('*unordentlich*') citizens and non-citizens, such as Jews, 'vagrants' (incorporating Yenish as well as other 'travellers'), the mentally ill, the physically disabled, unmarried mothers, and homosexuals. The eugenic conception of the national order was concerned with the elimination of such 'troubles', and the rational management of reproductive sexuality by the state was a central mechanism for doing just that. The fact that, in the Swiss federal state, it is the job of the local authorities, rather than the federal state, to carry the financial burden of supporting 'indigent' members of local communities may also have increased the appeal of the argument of cost-reduction. What is more, financial responsibility for its 'own' citizens also shaped differences in welfare practices between communes. Local practices with regard to marriage licences or sterilisation were thus shaped by economic concerns. However, this was not only true for Switzerland. For example, in Finland, some small communes were similarly anxious about their welfare expenses and, at certain times, this anxiety found expression in the denunciation of certain groups as 'asocials' and subsequently in eugenic interventions such as sterilisation.

In Switzerland, the eugenic experiments in social engineering were thus shaped by specific Swiss political institutions, in particular by federalism and its attendant levels of autonomy of local agencies and authorities. Indeed, many eugenic practices, such as forced sterilisation of (mainly) women's bodies, were not carried out by the central state, but through local legislation and administrative measures implemented by cantonal and local authorities as well as para-state actors such as psychiatric clinics. The latter, especially the university clinics in Zürich, Basel and Lausanne, offered practical opportunities for applying eugenicist ideas and technologies to a population which was most often already under tutelage or guardianship orders. Practices of direct intervention by the federal state were comparatively less widespread in Switzerland than elsewhere, but included large-scale policies such as those operated by *Pro Juventute*, as well as federal legislation introduced in 1912 prohibiting marriage for 'mentally deficient' persons and regulations in the Criminal Law aimed at curtailing sexual relations with the mentally deficient.<sup>28</sup>

Federalism led to important cantonal differences in policy frameworks and practices. The main dividing line here seems to have been religion; while, for example, Protestant cantons tended to adopt sterilisation measures, Catholic cantons, on the whole, did not. This reflected more general differences in attitudes towards poverty, illness and disability within Protestant and Catholic doctrine, in particular the Catholic belief that any form of life, no matter how 'damaged', 'defective' or 'flawed', is worth living. It is notable, perhaps,

Dossier 9, 1998; Carlo Wolfisberg, *Heilpädagogik und Eugenik: Zur Geschichte der Heilpädagogik in der deutschsprachigen Schweiz (1800-1950)*, Zürich, Chronos, 2002; Ramsauer, op.cit..

24. In the absence of exhaustive datasets on eugenic practices, it is to date generally assumed by historians that no cases of eugenic 'euthanasia' have taken place in the Swiss context.

25. Aeschbacher, op. cit., p286. According to Keller 1999, Rufer 1991 and Wottreng 1999 Forel's first sterilisation was in 1886 on a 14 year old 'hysterical' girl, original source in Forel 1917; psychiatric castration was pioneered in 1891 by Forel in Burghölzli (Wolf in Rosenow, 1938); Charles Wolf, in S. Zurukzoglu (ed), *Die Probleme der Eugenik unter Berücksichtigung der Verhütung erbkranken Nachwuchses*, Basel, Schwabe, 1938.

26. Forel, 'The Sexual Question' op. cit., 1906, p226, our translation.

27. Mottier, 'Narratives of National Identity', op. cit.

28. See Natalia Gerodetti, *Modernising Sexualities: Towards a Socio-historical Understanding of Sexualities in Switzerland*, Bern and Oxford, Peter Lang, 2005, Chapter 6.

that eugenic thinking was more easily translated into practice in Protestant countries, though it should be noted that in other Protestant contexts, such as the UK, eugenic initiatives were blocked by vigorous political opposition. That is not to say that in Catholic countries eugenics did not exist. In Nazi Germany, despite the *Casti Canubi* in which the Pope condemned eugenics in 1931, the Catholic Church eventually sided with the hegemonic political climate.<sup>29</sup> However, eugenics generally took different forms in Catholic contexts, privileging ‘positive’ eugenics’ (encouraging reproduction by ‘superior’ citizens) over ‘negative eugenics’ (the prevention of ‘inferior’ births). Religion alone was therefore significant but not decisive as a factor determining opposition to eugenic practices. Its role needs to be integrated into an analysis of political power which takes into account both religious and political constellations.

A pivotal role in providing institutional supports to eugenic discourse was played by the newly emerging disciplines of psychiatry and sexology. Their scientific expertise was used to legitimate eugenicist policies, in turn legitimising their own emergence as autonomous disciplines. Eugenic scientists were actively involved in the process of policy making, notably through their routine inclusion in expert committees. They also played an important role in policy implementation. Having established themselves as the sole experts in the identification of hereditary flaws, psychiatrists’ assessments in particular were used in connection with marriage permissions, guardianship orders, removal of children and, of course, sterilisations, thereby investing them with significant agency in the application of eugenic policies. For instance, at the beginning of the twentieth century, minimum stay and legal responsibility were required as criteria for naturalisation but individual cantons added further conditions, including psychiatric assessments.<sup>30</sup> Cantons such as Basel thus required candidates for the acquisition of Swiss citizenship to be examined by a psychiatric expert, with the aim of detecting hereditarily transmittable degenerate features. As these examples show, whether in the presence or in the absence of official state policies, individual actors in key positions such as psychiatrists and welfare office directors, had considerable room for manoeuvre, making the medical-bureaucratic alliance a particularly powerful agent in the application of eugenic measures.

Thus, eugenic ideas were influential in the formation of a number of pre-War and post-War health and social policies. These included not only forced sterilisation practices, but also non-voluntary incarceration in psychiatric clinics and other measures aimed specifically at vagrants, Yenish and the feeble-minded. As we have seen, since 1912, marriage was prohibited for the ‘mentally deficient’ and the ‘legally irresponsible’.<sup>31</sup> This made Switzerland the first European country to introduce a prohibitive marriage law based on eugenic rationale to prevent the reproduction of ‘mental deficiencies’.<sup>32</sup> World-wide, the first eugenic sterilisation law was introduced in Indiana in 1907 and by the 1930s, almost two-thirds of US states had similar legislation targeting, in particular, institutionalised individuals such as criminals and

29. Ingrid Richter, *Katholizismus und Eugenik in der Weimarer Republik und im Dritten Reich : zwischen Sittlichkeitsreform und Rassenhygiene*, Paderborn, Schöningh, 2001.

30. Gabriela Imboden, “Die geistesschwache Tante”: Einbürgerung und Eugenik in der Stadt Basel’, *Itinera*, 21 (1999): 264-80.

31. Article 97 of the Civil Code.

32. As practices in Basel suggest, on occasion, permission to marry was made conditional on ‘voluntary’ agreement to sterilisation. See Susanne Goepfert, “Eheunfähig”: Eheverbote nach Artikel 97 ZGB’, *Itinera*, 21 (1999): 259-71.

those labelled ‘mentally ill’. In 1928, the Swiss canton of Vaud, influenced by Forel’s ideas, adopted the first eugenic sterilisation law in Europe. It was followed by Denmark in 1929, Germany in 1933, Sweden and Norway in 1934 and Finland in 1935.

The law in the Canton of Vaud focused in particular on the loose category of the mentally ill, stating: ‘When it is likely that a person who has a mental illness or a mental defect which is proven to be incurable, will have degenerate offspring, medical measures may be applied to this person in order to prevent the birth of offspring’. The Vaud law existed from 1928 to 1985 and, during these 57 years, was applied to 187 individuals. Though only a handful of eugenic sterilisations took place in the post-war period in Vaud, the last case occurred less than 30 years ago in 1977.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, in other cantons, such as Zürich, the practice became commonplace. In the absence of a legal framework, psychiatrists and doctors had to obtain consent from the person involved or from his or her guardian. The way in which consent was obtained, however, was far removed from contemporary understandings of informed consent. The practice was, in fact, closer to a form of coercion, and included blackmail (the threat of withdrawal of welfare support or of referral to a workhouse), pressure (permission to abort only on condition of simultaneous ‘voluntary’ sterilisation), or simply the provision of inaccurate or distorted information.<sup>34</sup>

Reflecting the eugenicist focus on female bodies as the reproducers of the nation, the sterilisation of ‘inferior’ categories of the population was a strongly gendered practice. An early evaluation of the application of this law in the canton of Vaud carried out in 1944 reported that nine out of ten eugenic sterilisations were carried out on women.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, data from Zürich show that from 1929 to 1931, eugenic sterilisations were carried out on 480 women (in conjunction with abortion) and 15 men. Sterilisation was also a heavily gendered practice in other countries; almost 95 per cent of the Swedish sterilisations were carried out on women.<sup>36</sup>

The majority of legal sterilisations in the canton of Vaud were applied to young, female, social deviants; women who were deemed ‘maladapted’, living in poor conditions, mostly unmarried, and judged to have ‘low intelligence’.<sup>37</sup> The policing of respectable female sexuality appears to have been a central motive, since ‘loose morals’, ‘uninhibited’ female sexuality or ‘nymphomania’ were frequently used as arguments for forced sterilisation.<sup>38</sup>

In Zürich in the 1920s, for instance, prostitutes could legally be referred to psychiatric care when arrested. In a context where ‘feeble-mindedness’ was considered to be more easily inherited by women than by men and where prostitutes were considered to be particularly prone to pathologies, they were sometimes pressured into sterilisations. Sigwart Frank and Simon Jichlinksi, two psychiatrists who reported on sterilisation practices in Switzerland in the 1920s and 1940s, provide extensive case stories exemplifying linkages between sexual transgressions and sterilisations.<sup>39</sup> And in 1931, the directorate of the Poor Relief in Bern, the Swiss capital, issued a directive condemning

33. See Gilles Jeanmonod and Geneviève Heller, op. cit.

34. Regina Wecker, *‘Eugenik – individueller Ausschluss’*, op. cit., p169.

35. Ehrenström, Philippe, ‘Eugénisme et politique: réflexions sur une étude de cas’, *Les Annuelles*, 2, Lausanne, Université de Lausanne, 1991, p74.

36. Runcis, ‘Sterilization in the Swedish Welfare State’, op. cit.

37. Jeanmonod and Heller, op. cit.

38. Regina Wecker, *‘Eugenik – individueller Ausschluss’*, op. cit.

39. Sigwart Frank, *Praktische Erfahrungen mit Kastration und Sterilisation psychisch Defekter in der Schweiz*, Berlin, S. Krager, 1925; Simon Jichlinksi, *Les stérilisations et castrations eugéniques, prophylactiques et thérapeutiques*, Genève, Imprimerie du commerce, 1941.

the widespread practice of women's referrals for sterilisation by poor relief agencies and specifying that unmarried women, for instance, should only be sterilized 'if they show clear signs of physical or mental deficiency. [Sterilisation] should hence not be carried out only because of sexual licentiousness if that person is otherwise physically and mentally normal'.<sup>40</sup>

Despite the fact that figures on the exact number of sterilisations in other Swiss cantons remain unavailable, historians nevertheless agree that the practice became relatively widespread in Switzerland, especially as regards individuals who were already institutionalised in those psychiatric clinics that were the playgrounds of the eugenicist ideologues. The Vaud legislation permitting the sterilisation of the feeble-minded without consent provided a legal basis for sterilisations which were in fact already happening. Indeed, it was argued that the introduction of the legislation would restrict sterilisations which had previously been unregulated and widespread.<sup>41</sup> Legislation provoked varied reactions from psychiatrists, some of whom preferred to be left to their own devices and professional legal codes. Perceiving state regulation as an obstacle, the psychiatrist Maier would thus later comment that without the sterilisation law, 'Swiss psychiatry could work under rather good legal conditions'.<sup>42</sup>

While sterilisation policies were the most extreme form of eugenic regulation of reproductive sexuality by the welfare state, these practices were complemented by 'preventive' education policies. The emphasis which Forel, along with other campaigners, put on the necessity of eugenicist sexual education and marriage advice, paved the way for the entrance of eugenics into the education curriculum. For example, an information brochure was produced and distributed in Swiss schools and officers' associations in 1939. The brochure educated Swiss youth about the dangers of reproducing with degenerate others, and pointed out their patriotic duty to the national collective. Youths were thus encouraged to: 'Choose your spouse from a physically and morally healthy, mentally superior family! You owe this to your offspring and to the Nation'.<sup>43</sup> A 'Central Agency for Marriage and Sex Advice' was set up by social-democrat welfare reformers in Zürich in 1932 - followed later by other Swiss cities - and organised exhibitions, presentations and conferences on themes such as 'hereditary responsibility', 'psychiatric-eugenic advice on marital candidates' (1930s), and 'prevention of hereditarily diseased offspring' (1949). Sex and marital advice also constituted an area of action for feminist social reformers who subscribed to the need for a 'less degenerate' future generation.

Related to this, and a further example of eugenically informed measures, were guardianship practices (*Vormundschafswesen*) which since the introduction of the Civil Code in 1912 had been redefined as a domain of public policy and an important area of intervention in family life. For Swiss social democrats, from around 1910, a narrative of 'physical and moral neglect' (*Verwahrlosung*) started to supersede explanations of inequality based on the economic difficulties of working-class families. Improving the care that

40. Amtliche Mitteilungen 1931 der Direktion des Armenwesens des Kantons Bern, Februar 1931, No1: 1. Stadtarchiv Bern (Stab) D Couv Eheberatung/ Paartherapie, p4. For a fuller discussion see Natalia Gerodetti, 'Eugenic Family Politics and Social Democrats: "Positive" Eugenics and Marriage Advice Bureaus', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 19, 3 (2006): 217-244.

41. Aeschbacher, op. cit., p299.

42. Anna Grossenreiter et al, '... und wird dazu angehalten', op. cit., p234.

43. Werner Schmid, *Jung-Schweizer! Jung-Schweizerinnen! Das Schicksal des Vaterlandes ruht in Euch!*, Erlenbach, Rotapfel Verlag, 1939.

children received from their parents became increasingly prioritised over the provision of financial support to the parents. In Zürich, the social-democrat Paul Pflüger, as director of the guardianship authorities, played a central role. Pflüger used multi-faceted definitions of physical and moral neglect and his propositions for solutions included social insurance and a better organisation of economic life. While some cases demanded measures of 'social health care', including housing policies, and the fight against prostitution and alcohol, he also subscribed to the idea of 'race improvement' as a means to avoid the 'reproduction of socially, intellectually and morally deficient descendants'. Pflüger unsuccessfully demanded the introduction of a 'marriage ability attestation' to eradicate the last remnants of 'physical and moral neglect', together with allowing marriage for the mentally deficient only upon the prior sterilisation of the woman.<sup>44</sup>

44. Ramsauer, *op. cit.*, p173.

Pflüger's successor as head of the guardianship office in Zürich was also a social democrat. Whereas in 1908 social democrats needed the support of conservatives to introduce public guardianship, by 1925 they formed a majority in Zürich's parliament, marking the era of 'red Zürich'. This allowed them to make their own policy decisions and pursue social reforms. Social democrats were not unanimous in their support of eugenically informed social reform. Nevertheless, from 1900, highly educated social democrats started to distinguish themselves from uneducated working-class social democrats by seeking to occupy influential civil servant positions. Especially for those social democrats who were close to public administration and reform-oriented, the hereditarian paradigm became as central to social democrat vocabulary as milieu theory. It was also, often, the more salient framework for action.

## EUGENICS AND SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES

While eugenic ideas were articulated within opposing political projects, these projects shared a common call for interventionist state policies. The most vehement opposition, in addition to that of the Catholic Church, came from political liberals, suspicious of state intervention in matters that they considered to be part of the private sphere.<sup>45</sup> Social democrats and right-wing politicians were equally vocal in supporting eugenics, but social-democrats such as Forel and Pflüger were particularly instrumental in both pioneering and institutionalising eugenic technologies in the context of expanding welfare policies. It is no surprise that social democrats were avid defenders of eugenics within the state as they held a firm belief in the responsibilities of the state towards its citizens, individually and collectively. As Forel put it, an 'intelligent, scientific (not dogmatic) social-democracy' was needed in order to 'solve the eugenic problem'.<sup>46</sup> In addition, social democrats also promoted the subordination of individual interests to the collective good. Viewing eugenics as a social technology to alleviate poverty and social ills, social democrats conceptualised eugenic policies

45. On the position of the women's social purity movements, see Natalia Gerodetti, "Lay Experts": Women's Social Purity Groups and the Politics of Sexuality in late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century Switzerland', *Women's History Review*, 13, 4 (2004): 595-610.

46. Forel, *La morale en soi*, *op. cit.*

as being in the collective interest of the nation.

Switzerland was by no means an exceptional case, however. It has been estimated that in Sweden, where eugenics was even more clearly intertwined with the construction of the social-democratic welfare state, 63,000 citizens were sterilised on eugenic grounds between 1934 and 1976.<sup>47</sup> What is more, other European countries soon followed the Scandinavian and Swiss examples. Eugenic discourses were scientifically orthodox and their respectability was seldom questioned, and so eugenics seeped into mainstream culture in pre-Second World War Europe. The German social democrat party (SPD), which had links with both the Swedish and the Swiss social democrats, played an important role in the development of left-wing versions of eugenics in the Weimar republic, long before the Nazis applied a more radical form of eugenic policy. The SPD-politicians Alfred Grotjahn (who also occupied the first Chair in 'social hygiene' in Berlin) and Wolfgang Heine introduced the first eugenic measures, including the sterilisation of disabled people, in the social-democratic governed Prussia of the 1920s. Preference was given to negative over positive eugenics.

Social-democratic scientists, in particular sexologists, played as central a role in Germany as they did in Switzerland. For example, Magnus Hirschfeld was a prominent pioneer in the field of sexual reform and a homosexual himself. He was also a eugenicist who energetically campaigned against marriage for homosexuals. Indeed, he believed that, given their 'inferior' genes, homosexuals would be prone to giving birth to retarded children. Despite the fact that many social-democratic eugenicists, including Hirschfeld, later fell victim to the Nazis, or fled Germany, they did not, as a rule, oppose Nazi measures such as forced sterilisation, a practice which Hirschfeld considered 'an interesting experiment ...', with the prudent qualification that 'it will be a long while before the results can be judged on their merits'.<sup>48</sup> Hirschfeld, like his friend and mentor Forel in Switzerland, was also involved with the social democrat and eugenicist Marriage Advisory Board which he had helped to develop in the context of his Institute for Sexual Science in the early 1930s and which became a forerunner of Nazi family eugenics. Disagreements with Nazi eugenicists centred, rather, on the 'fanatic' and consequently unscientific character of Nazi science, and especially on the matter of who should be included in the category of inferior persons. Indeed, social democrats such as Hirschfeld disapproved of the Nazi obsession with Jews (and complained that alcoholics and drug addicts consequently received less attention), a disapproval that was shared by British mainstream eugenicists. Interestingly, the *International Medical Bulletin*, which was edited in Prague by Jewish and social democrat doctors who had fled Germany, attacked the 1933 Nazi sterilisation law on political rather than ethical grounds: 'such a law is abused as an instrument of power in a capitalist state ... only after a social revolution will it be possible to create the scientific and social conditions for "true" eugenics'.<sup>49</sup>

Eugenic health policies were, within the SPD, primarily supported by the

47. Runcis, 'Sterilization in the Swedish Welfare State', op.cit..

48. Magnus Hirschfeld, *Racism*, London, Gollanz, 1938.

49. Quoted in Sheri Berman, 'Euthanasia, eugenics and fascism: how close are the connections? Review of Werner Brill: *Pädagogik im Spannungsfeld von Eugenik und Euthanasie*. St. Ingbert: Röhrig Universitätsverlag, 1994', *German Politics and Society*, 1999.

nationalist Noske-Group. However, it should be noted that not all German social democrats supported these policies. Bitter debates took place within the SPD over the influence on social inequality of heredity versus acquired characteristics. However, the collapse of the Socialist Internationale and the emergence of militaristic nationalism since the start of the First World War were clearly congruent with the conflation of the social with the national order which characterised eugenic strands of social democracy in Germany and elsewhere. Another factor which was conducive to the merging of eugenic and social democrat ideas was the Marxist heritage of a belief in the power of scientific explanations of the social order - despite Marx and Engels's own rejection of naturalistic explanations. In the UK and the US, a movement of *Bolsjevist Eugenics* emerged in the 1930s, which saw the Soviet Union as the only country that would be able to adopt a scientific stance towards the improvement of the community. Meanwhile, in France, socialists such as Vacher de Lapouge, at various times a candidate for the *Parti Socialiste Ouvrier*, promoted the idea that citizens should fulfil a 'sexual service' in addition to their military service to the nation. Socialist versions of eugenics thus became part of the intellectual and political project of European social democracy. At the same time, however, it should be remembered that there were internal divisions amongst social democrats regarding eugenics, and it would be misleading to align social democracy and eugenics in any simplistic way.<sup>50</sup>

\*\*\*

Although eugenic ideas were articulated from both sides of the political spectrum, and some social democrats strongly opposed them, social democracy nevertheless played a key role in the creation of eugenic technologies in countries such as Switzerland and Sweden between the 1920s and 1960s. It was within the framework of the axis of scientific disciplines, state actors and private organisations that eugenic thinking was most 'successfully' applied, with social democrats being involved as civil servants, bureaucrats and scientists. In Sweden and Switzerland, in the absence of the colonial encounter with other racial groups, preoccupations with racial purity turned inwards rather than outwards. This resulted in the intensifying categorisation and hierarchisation of 'internal others' such as 'gypsies', 'loose women', or the mentally and physically disabled, who were deemed to be sources of physical as well as moral degeneration. Border patrols were thus particularly engaged in the safeguarding of internal boundaries which had both a biological as well as a moral dimension. The former involved control of certain groups' access to reproduction, the latter the creation of an ideological framework which would sustain the future social order. The danger inherent in an inclusive utopia of a society with strong communal ties is that those falling outside of the collective norms may well become particularly subjected to social discipline.

The emergence of modern welfare policies and the presence of a favourable political context offered an institutional framework for attempts to

50. See also the Zürich social democrat and medic Fritz Brupacher who was vocally engaged in disputes amongst social democrats over eugenic policies. Fritz Brupacher, *60 Jahre Ketzer: Selbstbiographie "Ich log so wenig als möglich"*. Zürich, Verlagsgenossenschaft, 1981.

realise the eugenic dream. ‘Negative’ eugenic technologies such as sterilisation without consent and marriage interdictions were combined with ‘positive’ measures such as eugenic education, sex education, and marriage advice. Limiting the numbers of those population categories that were to become the main recipients of the new welfare provisions appeared in this context as a rational means of cost-reduction. Although not all policy-makers agreed with the eugenic emphasis on the influence of heredity rather than the social environment, the cost-reduction argument often led them nevertheless to support eugenically motivated sterilisations. After all, sterilisation was a lot cheaper for the state than the long-term financial support of ‘degenerates’. In comparison with current public debates on the new genetics, or on other life technologies such as euthanasia, where any reference to the costs of maintaining the existence of persons who need care is surrounded with deep taboo, the openness with which politicians explicitly used the cost-argument in public debate at the time appears remarkable.<sup>51</sup>

The claim that many social problems result from biological, hereditary factors, or at least from an interaction between hereditary and social conditions, was central to the eugenic policy experiments. Nowadays, eugenics in its earlier twentieth-century guises is largely discredited, although aspects of eugenic narrative survive in relation to the new human genetics involved with eradicating certain illnesses or improving the gene pool of the human race. Interventions into certain groups’ reproductive capacities continue to be practised in contemporary Switzerland, where certain cantons allow for the legal sterilisation of mentally retarded citizens for example, as well as in countries such as the United States.<sup>52</sup> Meanwhile, Western nations fret about the diminishing working population who should be guaranteeing future pensions, while populist politicians - not all of them on the extreme-right - depict the dangers of the nation being ‘overrun’ by higher birth rates amongst foreign immigrants. Eugenicist fears about the decreasing middle-class population within a nation continue to reverberate, albeit on a global level and no longer within a eugenicist argumentative framework. Decisions faced by parents, medics and ethicists about the ‘value’ of life, it is argued, have turned the eugenics of the state into a eugenics of the private sphere and individual decision-making.<sup>53</sup> However, individual decisions about life and birth do not happen in a social and political vacuum and ‘lay’ people and experts alike operate in relation to collective values and norms.<sup>54</sup> Conversely, to characterise eugenic practices in the first half of the twentieth century exclusively as ‘collectivist’ would be to ignore the way in which eugenic practices were targeted at individuals and the way in which individuals’ life histories have been shaped by the values and norms that emerged within the eugenic framework. As the eugenic experiences suggest, the assumption of a clear dichotomy between ‘collectivist’ and ‘individualist’ concerns is as problematic to social and political philosophy as that between the private and the public.

Social discipline remains an integral component of modern welfare

51. For a fuller discussion of this aspect, see Véronique Mottier, ‘Social-democratic en eugenetica’, *Socialisme en Democratie*, 9 (2003): 20-28.

52. Susan L. Thomas, ‘Race, Gender, and Welfare Reform: The Antinatalist Response’, *Journal of Black Studies*, 28 (1998): 419-46 and Deborah Pfeiffer, ‘Eugenics and Disability Discrimination’, *Disability and Society*, 9, 4 (1994): 481-499.

53. See for instance Jean-Noël Missa, “‘L’individu n’est rien, l’espèce est tout”: analyse historique de l’évolution de la question de l’eugénisme au XXe siècle”, in J.-N. Missa and C. Susanne (eds), *De l’eugénisme d’État à l’eugénisme privé*, Bruxelles, de Boeck & Larcier, 1999.

54. A concern which is shared by Anne Kerr and Tom Shakespeare, *Genetic Politics: From Eugenics to Genome*, Cheltenham, New Clarion, 2002.

provision. However, current forms of social discipline are rarely legitimised with an appeal to ‘nature’, but rather to ‘nurture’ - the most frequently used version of the nurture argument being the appeal to ‘cultural differences’ as a cause of the ‘lagging behind’ of certain social groups, especially immigrants. Recent developments in the area of the new genetics and biotechnologies have revived earlier preoccupations with hereditary factors. But perhaps the area which most aptly provides a parallel with eugenic technologies is the application of genetic technologies in agriculture and the foods industry. Whereas contemporary human reproductive technologies tend to be individualised, as benefiting primarily prospective parents, food technologies are more explicitly presented as serving the interests of the collective. Proponents of GM food routinely claim that crops enriched and enhanced through genetic modification will help alleviate malnutrition and, thereby, poverty. That this is a political strategy rather than an accurate reflection of the social reality of those who are at the receiving end of this technological intervention becomes clear when seed monopolies and similar issues are taken into account. Although the identification of a link between technology and the amelioration of social conditions is a powerful discursive strategy, at the very least we have come to learn to be more critical of the claimed benefits of technology, as risk society theorists have shown.<sup>55</sup>

The eugenic experiments in Switzerland and elsewhere illustrate how, for the modern state, care and protection of the weakest sectors of society are intertwined with the policing, surveillance and disciplining of these same groups. The social-democratic belief in state intervention and in the redeeming power of education, combined with the legitimising appeal to eugenic ‘science’, formed the ideological basis for the modern ‘gardening state’<sup>56</sup> which attempted to eradicate the weeds from its national garden. Far from constituting an accident in the history of social democracy, the eugenic social experiments, we have argued, fit in comfortably with core elements of social democratic thought, in particular the subordination of the individual to the collective interest of the national community. The stronger the communal ties, the stronger the exclusion of certain groups that fall outside its frontiers. It is possible that the social democratic emphasis on a cohesive society and on inclusive equality ironically also made it prone to exclusionary practices such as those involved in eugenic technologies.

*We wish to thank the Swiss National Science Foundation (Grant 61-66003.01) for generous funding of the research upon which this article is based, and the Institut d’Etudes Politiques et Internationales, University of Lausanne, Jesus College, Cambridge and CAVA and CIGS, University of Leeds, for institutional support. Also thanks to Carolyn Burdett, James Clackson, Geoff Harcourt, Angelique Richardson and Rhona Watson for helpful suggestions, and to Daniel Burgess and Olaf Henricson-Bell for stylistic improvements of the text.*

55. Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society*, London, Sage, 1992.

56. We borrow this term from Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1989.