

## Empire and its Discontents

### Circulation of Knowledge and the Emergence of Eugenics in the Late Habsburg Empire

*Abstract:* The circulation of knowledge poses new questions to the scholarship on eugenics in the Habsburg Empire. Focusing on imperial networks and the cognitive management of imperial diversity, this paper analyses three cases of imperial circulation of eugenic knowledge. It shows that the actors, institutions, and geographies of such circulation varied substantially, depending on the practices out of which the particular type of eugenic knowledge emerged and the functions it served.

*Keywords:* Knowledge, Circulation, Eugenics, Habsburg Empire, Imperial Diversity

This paper explores new questions about imperial networks and the cognitive management of imperial diversity that the concept of knowledge circulation poses to the scholarship on eugenics in the Habsburg Empire.<sup>1</sup> On the assumption that eugenic knowledge circulated at multiple levels – not only national but also local, imperial, and global – I trace the circulation of eugenic knowledge within the Habsburg Empire. Moreover, I plead for a more complex understanding of early eugenics in Austria-Hungary as an attempt “to make sense of the empire” emerging from an

---

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25365/oezg-2023-34-3-6>



Accepted for publication after external peer review (double blind)

Vojtěch Pojar, Department of History, Central European University, Quellenstraße 51, A-1100 Vienna, Austria, Pojar\_Vojtech@phd.ceu.edu

1 I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their comments on the previous version of this paper. I am grateful to the editors of this special issue, Nora Lehner, Florence Klauda, and Lisa Hoppel, as well as to Sebastian Felten for their feedback, and for guiding this paper through the publishing process. This paper was written while the author was affiliated with Centre français de recherche en sciences sociales (UMIFRE 13 CNRS-MEAE USR 3138 CNRS), Prague, Czech Republic.

“interplay between nationalism and imperial aspirations, regional concerns, and ‘central’ impulses as well as international rivalries and internal interests”.<sup>2</sup>

Two interrelated trends in the intellectual history of the Habsburg Empire inspired this paper. On the one hand, the circulation of knowledge emerged as a powerful framework for studying the movement of ideas and their materialisations. As Kapil Raj defines it, circulation focuses on the transformative effects of “the processes of encounter, power and resistance, negotiation, and reconfiguration that occur in cross-cultural interaction”.<sup>3</sup> Applying Raj’s concept to Austria-Hungary, Jan Surman encourages historians to examine “the circulation of knowledge in the Habsburg Empire” as “an imperial culture of its own”.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, historians of science discovered imperial diversity. Deborah Coen, in particular, shows how “the imperial project of mapping natural and human difference” produced “a vision of the empire as a circulatory system”.<sup>5</sup> The circulation of knowledge and representations of imperial diversity are thus intimately linked and need to be studied together.

Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine emphasise that rather than a clearly demarcated scientific discipline, eugenics was “a shared language and ambition” linking different contexts.<sup>6</sup> This was also true in the Habsburg Empire, where eugenic knowledge circulated on the imperial level across cultural divides. Analysing three distinct cases of such imperial circulation of eugenic knowledge, my paper shows that its actors, institutions, and geographies varied substantially, depending on the practices out of which the particular type of eugenic knowledge emerged and on the function which it was expected to serve. Firstly, exchanges of eugenic knowledge between the largest urban centres of the empire were driven chiefly by eugenicists involved in popular education and social reform. The concepts involved in this ‘inter-urban circulation’ were a paradoxical attempt to imagine imperial diversity, while going beyond nationalism. Secondly, eugenic concepts circulated between profession-

---

2 Tatjana Buklijaš/Emese Lafferton, Science, Medicine, and Nationalism in the Habsburg Empire from the 1840s to 1918, in: *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science, Part C: Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 38/4 (2007), 679–686, 684.

3 Kapil Raj, *Beyond Postcolonialism ... and Postpositivism. Circulation and the Global History of Science*, in: *Isis* 104/2 (2013), 337–347, 343.

4 Jan Surman, *The Circulation of Scientific Knowledge in the Late Habsburg Monarchy. Multicultural Perspectives on Imperial Scholarship*, in: *Austrian History Yearbook* 46 (2015), 163–182, 163.

5 Deborah Coen, *Climate and Circulation in Imperial Austria*, in: *The Journal of Modern History* 82/4 (2010), 839–875, 839–840; Deborah Coen, *Climate in Motion. Science, Empire, and the Problem of Scale*, Chicago 2018; Franz Fillafer, *Imperial Diversity, Fractured Sovereignty, and Legal Universals. Hans Kelsen and Eugen Ehrlich in Their Habsburg Context*, in: *Modern Intellectual History* 19/2 (2022), 421–443; Thomas Prendergast, *The Sociological Idea of the State. Legal Education, Austrian Multinationalism, and the Future of Continental Empire, 1880–1914*, in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 62/2 (2020), 327–358.

6 Philippa Levine/Alison Bashford, *Introduction. Eugenics and the Modern World*, in: ead. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics*, Oxford 2010, 3–20, 4.

als – medical doctors, psychiatrists, and educators – involved in the administration of various provinces of the empire, often without the mediation of the metropolis. The ‘inter-provincial circulation’ that thus emerged enabled the exchanges of eugenic knowledge designed for the purposes of an administrative and educational reform. Thirdly, nationalist activists on the language frontiers of the empire played an active role in circulating eugenic knowledge and adapting it for their agendas. The most overtly nationalist and exclusionary forms of eugenics were fostered by such ‘inter-frontier circulation’ in pre-war Austria-Hungary. This argument, which highlights the circulation of eugenic knowledge within Austria-Hungary across its diverse communities, is consistent with the new narrative of the Habsburg Empire as a “regularized and integrated imperial space” introduced by Pieter Judson.<sup>7</sup>

Historians of eugenics in East Central Europe tend to focus on nationalist eugenic projects, studying their circulation in national, and in some cases, local contexts.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, they assume that eugenicists formed national associations and developed national scientific styles prior to entering transnational networks. My paper questions this scholarship. While the cases I analyse below do not constitute an exhaustive list of all the networks eugenic knowledge entered and of all the functions it assumed in Austria-Hungary, they do reveal the prevalence of the circulation of eugenic knowledge within the empire. Focusing on the early eugenic initiatives that took place before the consolidation of nation states in the interwar period, the paper suggests that the circulation of eugenic knowledge on the imperial level emerged together with its national counterpart in a process of mutual constitution, and at times even preceded it.

## Beyond the nation: popular education, metropolitan contexts, and the concepts of cooperation

Over the course of the nineteenth century, Snait Gissis observes that an organicist-evolutionist framework “turned into a meta-disciplinary tenet, colored the rhetoric and the epistemic assumptions of other disciplines and imparted an almost homogeneous appearance to many sciences”.<sup>9</sup> Sociology was one of them. Drawing on

---

7 Pieter Judson, *The Habsburg Empire. A New History*, Cambridge, MA 2016, 8.

8 The trend-setting work was Maria Bucur, *Eugenics and Modernization in Interwar Romania*, Pittsburgh 2002. The most recent overview is Marius Turda (ed.), *The History of East-Central European Eugenics, 1900–1945*, London 2015. A notable exception is Marius Turda/Aaron Gillette, *Latin Eugenics in Comparative Perspective*, London 2014.

9 Snait Gissis, *Late Nineteenth Century Lamarckism and French Sociology*, in: *Perspectives on Science* 10/1 (2002), 69–122, 82.

Lamarckism, early sociologists defined their research object – ‘the social’ – as enmeshed with biology and governed by identical laws. Importantly, advocating fluid boundaries between these spheres was not clearly associated with any political ideology. It could serve both left- and right-wing political projects alike. As the leading Hungarian left-leaning sociologist Oszkár Jászi put it in his programmatic text *Mi a szociológia? (What is Sociology?)*, “the key to the society is hidden at the boundary of sociology and biology”.<sup>10</sup> Even though not every sociologist who saw this boundary as fluid became a eugenicist, sociology did provide a platform for a vivid discussion on eugenics.

In the late Habsburg Empire, the emergence of sociology was crucial for the rise of eugenic thinking, both institutionally and intellectually. To start with, the *Arbeitssektion für Sozialbiologie und Eugenik (Section for Social Biology and Eugenics)* was launched in November 1913 within the *Sociological Society* in Vienna. Rather than a turn towards eugenics by the *Sociological Society*, the founding of the first self-described eugenic association in the Habsburg Empire was a culmination of an interest in this discipline that went back to the early 1900s.<sup>11</sup> In Hungary, there were two associations of sociologists, and the eugenically inflected members of both attempted to establish a eugenic association. Marius Turda shows that in the case of the left-wing *Társadalomtudományi Társaság (Society for Social Sciences)*, these attempts came from René Berkovics, who in 1912 considered setting up a eugenic association in Nagyvárad/Großwardein/Oradea, a large town with a sprawling modernist culture. However, his attempt came to nothing. The first Hungarian eugenic association thus saw light only in January 1914 and emerged from within the other association of sociologists in Hungary, the *Társadalomtudományi Egyesület (Association for Social Sciences)*.<sup>12</sup> Finally, in Prague, the *Česká společnost eugenická (Czech Eugenic Society)* held its first public assembly in May 1915 and counted sociologists among its most influential members. Conversely, one of the founding members of the eugenics society, the sociologist Břetislav Foustka, would later become the first president of the *Masarykova sociologická společnost (Masaryk Sociological Society)*.<sup>13</sup> All the earliest self-described eugenic associations in Austria-Hungary thus emerged from within the communities of sociologists in the largest urban centres of the empire.

---

10 Oszkár Jászi, *Mi a szociológia? (What is Sociology?)*, Budapest 1908, 32.

11 Gudrun Exner, *Die Soziologische Gesellschaft in Wien (1907–1934) und die Bedeutung Rudolf Goldscheids für ihre Vereinstätigkeit*, Vienna 2013, passim. From its founding in 1907, more than a dozen lectures on eugenic issues were delivered to the Sociological Society.

12 Marius Turda, *Eugenics and Nation in Early 20th Century Hungary*, Houndmills 2014, 119–122.

13 Michal Šimůnek, *Eugenics, Social Genetics and Racial Hygiene. Plans for the Scientific Regulation of Human Heredity in the Czech Lands, 1900–1925*, in: Marius Turda/Paul Weindling (eds.), *Blood and Homeland. Eugenics and Racial Nationalism in Central and Southeast Europe, 1900–1940*, Budapest 2007, 145–166.

While these communities of sociologists – following Spencer, Ostwald, or Comte, respectively – drew on different varieties of positivism, they pursued similar practical endeavours.<sup>14</sup> Popular education programmes were paramount among them. These practices shaped their eugenic blueprints. Veronika Hofer explains that the commitment of left-wing Viennese eugenicists to the notion of developmental plasticity can be traced back to their practical involvement in popular education. Only if such education shaped more than just individual bodies and minds, they believed, could it truly contribute to the socialist goal of moulding a new generation of humans.<sup>15</sup> An argument along the same lines can be made about the involvement in popular science of some of the early eugenicists in Prague and Brünn/Brno.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Hungarian left-wing sociologists launched the Free School in Budapest, “one of their most lasting achievements”.<sup>17</sup> Eugenics not only featured in its lectures, but assumptions about intergenerational human betterment framed the programme of the school, as well. Crucially, these popular education programmes aimed at metropolitan working- and middle-class audiences that were pronouncedly multi-ethnic. Instead of emphasising the divides between these communities and calling for a struggle between nations or ‘races’ in a social Darwinist key, these eugenicists sought concepts that would enable them to move beyond nationalism. Critical among the agendas shared by many of sociologists-turned-eugenicists was the attempt to conceptualise and legitimise imperial diversity.

Paradoxically, biology provided these eugenicists with the categories that allowed them to construct analytical frameworks that transcended cultural differences and thus to think about imperial diversity. The eugenicists Paul Kammerer, Rudolf Goldscheid, and Julius Tandler, who were members of the *Arbeitssektion* of the *Viennese Sociological Society*, are prime examples of this. Crucially, as we will see, Kammerer explored the notion of symbiosis in nature and used it as a metaphor for the diverse Austro-Hungarian state. Equally important was the concept of “human economy” (*Menschenökonomie*) coined by Goldscheid. By discussing the economy of humans and proposing that individuals and populations be viewed through the prism of energy conservation, Goldscheid sought to redirect the attention of eugenicists away from the medical notions of disease and pathology and towards the economic cate-

---

14 Jan Surman/Franz Fillafer/Johannes Feichtinger, *The Worlds of Positivism. A Global Intellectual History, 1770–1930*, New York 2017, passim.

15 Veronika Hofer, Rudolf Goldscheid, Paul Kammerer und die Biologen des Prater-Vivariums in der liberalen Volksbildung der Wiener Moderne, in: Mitchell Ash/Christian Stifter (eds.), *Wissenschaft, Politik und Öffentlichkeit*, Vienna 2002, 149–184.

16 Vojtěch Pojar, *Quality over Quantity. Expert Knowledge and the Politics of Food in Prague, 1914–1918*, MA thesis, Central European University, Budapest 2017, 71–110.

17 György Litván, *A Twentieth Century Prophet. Oscar Jászi, 1875–1957*, Budapest 2006, 46.

gories of utility and efficiency.<sup>18</sup> In turn, and more ambiguously, Tandler attempted to decentre the notion of race by emphasising the individual “condition” and “constitution” as the most important targets of eugenic intervention.<sup>19</sup> All these concepts were underpinned by a neo-Lamarckian emphasis on the plasticity of nature, which allowed human beings to be moulded as if they were no more than “soft wax in our hands.”<sup>20</sup>

Eugenic concepts circulated among sociologists not only in Vienna but also in other urban centres of the empire. These exchanges were facilitated by a constant movement of knowledge, people, and material artefacts. Viennese eugenicists, for example, often lectured in the Hungarian capital while local periodicals published their papers and reviewed their work.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, they also maintained a close connection to Moravia and Bohemia. Apart from touring both provinces with his lectures, for instance, Paul Kammerer also exchanged letters and offprints of their papers with the secretary of the *Czech Eugenic Society*. Felicitas Kammerer, his bilingual wife, facilitated this exchange by her translations.<sup>22</sup> The involvement of these eugenicists in such an inter-urban regime of knowledge circulation reinforced their image of the empire itself as a space of cooperation.

The concepts of cooperation based on mutual benefit were hotly debated by eugenicists in Austria-Hungary. In the early years of the twentieth century, the theories of Pyotr Kropotkin and Franklin Giddings were particularly influential. Drawing on the mutualist traditions in the Tsarist and British Empires, the zoologist and anarchist theorist Kropotkin suggested that cooperation, or “mutual aid”, was widespread in both nature and society. It provided an advantage to organisms that faced hostile environments, facilitating their survival and further development. It was thus a crucial factor of evolution. Indeed, Kropotkin’s main aim was to prove that coop-

---

18 Gudrun Exner, Rudolf Goldscheids “Menschenökonomie” im Kontext von Julius Tandlers Wohlfahrtskonzepten, lamarckistisch motivierter Reformeugenik, Soziologie, Monismus, Pazifismus und der Frauenfrage, in: Daniela Angetter et al. (eds.), *Strukturen und Netzwerke. Medizin und Wissenschaft in Wien 1848–1955*, Göttingen 2018, 393–408.

19 Cheryl Logan, *Hormones, Heredity, and Race. Spectacular Failure in Interwar Vienna*, New Brunswick 2013, 129–135.

20 Sander Gilboff, “Protoplasm... is Soft Wax in Our Hands”. Paul Kammerer and the Art of Biological Transformation, in: *Endeavour* 29/4 (2005), 162–167; Klaus Taschwer, Darwin und die frühe Eugenik in Wien. Wie und warum der Soziallamarckismus in Österreich die biopolitischen Diskussionen rund um den Ersten Weltkrieg bestimmte, in: Wolfgang Reiter/Herbert Matis (eds.), *Darwin in Zentraleuropa. Die wissenschaftliche, weltanschauliche und populäre Rezeption im 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhundert*, Wien 2018, 343–360.

21 A Társadalomtudományi Társaság jubiláris ülése (The Anniversary Session of the Society of Social Sciences), in: *Huszadik Század* 13/8 (1912), 866–871; Jelentés a Társadalomtudományi Társaságnak 1912–1913. évi működéséről (A Report of the Work of the Society of Social Sciences in 1912–1913), in: *Huszadik Század* 15/1 (1914), 167–170.

22 Archives of the Department of the History of Biological Sciences, Brno, Kříženecký papers, Correspondence with Kammerer, Letter from Kammerer to Kříženecký from 23 April 1915.

eration was of greater importance to evolution than the struggle for existence.<sup>23</sup> The sociologist Giddings, in turn, sought to find a psychological explanation for such cooperative behaviour.

It is striking that eugenicists played a major role in mediating these theories to various audiences in Austria-Hungary through a plethora of lectures, articles, and, importantly, translations. In Budapest, a Hungarian translation of Kropotkin's key book *Mutual Aid* was published by the eugenicist József Madzsar.<sup>24</sup> István Apáthy, head of the first Hungarian eugenics society, also followed Kropotkin in emphasising mutual aid.<sup>25</sup> In Prague, Břetislav Foustka translated Giddings' *Principles of Sociology* in 1900, and repeatedly invoked them in his influential 1904 book on eugenics.<sup>26</sup> In Zagreb, in turn, the eugenically oriented sociologist Ernest Miler approvingly discussed Kropotkin's arguments about mutual aid and went on to translate Giddings' textbook.<sup>27</sup> Andrija Štampar, a student of Tandler who would later play a key role in shaping public health in interwar Yugoslavia, also echoed Kropotkin.<sup>28</sup>

While neither of these theories originated in Austria-Hungary, they had a particular reception in the context of the multi-ethnic empire. While Kropotkin and Giddings were mainly interested in the cooperation within or between social classes, their Habsburg readers were also concerned with the question of whether mutual aid took place primarily within ethnic groups, or whether different groups could also cooperate. The human norms that the "moral authority of nature" was invoked to justify were varied and multifaceted.<sup>29</sup> The answers included a negotiation with the Habsburg imperial project, but also with internationalism, federalism, and nationalism, and their various combinations.

---

23 Daniel Todes, *Darwin without Malthus. The Struggle for Existence in Russian Evolutionary Thought*, New York 1989; Piers Hale, *Political Descent. Malthus, Mutualism, and the Politics of Evolution in Victorian England*, Chicago 2014, 206–251.

24 Pyotr Kropotkin, *A kölcsönös segítség mint természettörvény (Mutual Aid as a Law of Nature)*, Budapest 1908. Note the emphasis on the naturalness of mutual aid in the title of Madzsar's translation of Kropotkin's book *Mutual Aid*, which replaced the original subtitle "A Factor of Evolution" with "A Law of Nature".

25 István Apáthy, *A társas erkölcsről (On Social Ethics)*, in: *Világ*, 25 December 1913, 65–66. In Apáthy's case the notion of mutual aid underpinned mainly a vision of social cooperation within a national community.

26 Břetislav Foustka, *Slabí v lidské společnosti. Ideály humanitní a degenerace národů (The Weak in a Human Society. Humanitarian Ideals and the Degeneration of Nations)*, Prague 1904.

27 Ernest Miler, *Anarkista Kropotkin o međusobnoj pomoći kao glavnom zakonu ljudskog društva (The Anarchist Kropotkin on Mutual Aid as the Main Law of Human Society)*, in: *Mjesečnik Pravničkoga društva u Zagrebu* 38 (1912), 106–113, 193–199.

28 Martin Kuhar, "From an Impure Source, All Is Impure". *The Rise and Fall of Andrija Štampar's Public Health Eugenics in Yugoslavia*, in: *Social History of Medicine* 30/1 (2017), 92–113, 95.

29 Lorraine Daston/Fernando Vidal (eds.), *Introduction: Doing What Comes Naturally*, in: eid., *The Moral Authority of Nature*, Chicago 2004, 2–5.

Around 1910, biologist and eugenicist Paul Kammerer fundamentally reframed this debate. Going beyond mutual aid, Kammerer drew on the theories of symbiosis. He argued that some organisms of different species engage in cooperative behaviour that brings them mutual benefit. Building in part on the experimental research he and his colleagues at Vivarium were working on, Kammerer tried to document that such behaviour could be observed both among simple and complex organisms.<sup>30</sup> For a neo-Lamarckian such as Kammerer, it was crucial that this behaviour was driven by instincts, and these instincts could be acquired – and passed on to the offspring. In a conducive environment, therefore, various groups in human society would start engaging in such symbiotic behaviour, and they could become increasingly intertwined as a result.<sup>31</sup> In a 1914 essay entitled *Nationalismus und Biologie* (Nationalism and Biology), Kammerer made it perfectly clear that his aim was eminently political. Symbiosis was meant to be an alternative to racial nationalism that was on the rise in Central Europe.<sup>32</sup> Kammerer thus translated the trope of ‘unity in diversity’ into biology and used it to reimagine Austria-Hungary as an empire of symbiosis.

The concept of symbiosis circulated within Austria-Hungary and became popular among social scientists in its major cities. However, it would be misleading to portray the echoes of these discussions beyond Vienna as a result of a linear or hierarchical process. Eszter Gantner, Heidi Hein-Kircher, and Oliver Hochadel have recently argued that the ‘second’ or ‘emerging’ cities, such as the provincial capitals of Austria-Hungary, did not simply replicate the metropolis. Instead, they engaged in multidirectional knowledge exchanges that were “highly eclectic” and shaped by local factors.<sup>33</sup> These exchanges were, moreover, facilitated by new, horizontal expert networks that often combined institutional and personal dimensions.<sup>34</sup> As a result, arguments about symbiosis were “altered, combined, hybridized, and adapted” as they circulated through the urban contexts of Austria-Hungary.<sup>35</sup>

To begin with, some German-speaking eugenicists in the Bohemian Lands, such as Hugo Iltis in Brünn/Brno, were quick to embrace Kammerer’s arguments. However, Iltis was even more systematic than Kammerer in embedding the concept of

---

30 Paul Kammerer, *Symbiose zwischen Libellenlarve und Fadenalge*, in: *Archiv für Entwicklungsmechanik der Organismen* 25/1 (1907), 52–81. For an overview of the debate on symbiosis see Jan Sapp, *Evolution by Association. A History of Symbiosis*, New York 1994.

31 Paul Kammerer, *Genossenschaften von Lebewesen auf Grund gegenseitiger Vorteile (Symbiose)*, Bern 1913.

32 Paul Kammerer, *Nationalismus und Biologie*, in: *Das monistische Jahrhundert* 2/42 (1914), 1177–1185.

33 Eszter Gantner/Heidi Hein-Kircher/Oliver Hochadel, *Introduction: Searching for Best Practices in Interurban Networks*, in: eid. (eds.), *Interurban Knowledge Exchange in Southern and Eastern Europe, 1870–1950*, New York 2021, 1–22, 18.

34 *Ibid.*

35 *Ibid.*, 3.



symbiosis within Austro-Marxist political ideology.<sup>36</sup> In Budapest, left-wing sociologists also discussed Kammerer's ideas, republished some of his papers, including *Nationalismus und Biologie*, and invited him to speak at their meetings on several occasions.<sup>37</sup> However, some of these Hungarian eugenicists were more willing to consider arguments about cooperation than Kammerer's neo-Lamarckism, and they instead supported the concept of hard heredity.<sup>38</sup> Finally, some of the key figures in the emerging *Czech Eugenic Society* in Prague subscribed to Kammerer's arguments on the inheritance of acquired characteristics, as well as his notion of symbiosis, while negotiating them with Czech nationalism.<sup>39</sup> In other words, the circulation of concepts such as mutual aid and symbiosis in the Habsburg Empire shows that some individuals adopted eugenics to pursue an unlikely goal. Kammerer and others utilised eugenics to imagine, and indeed to promote, imperial diversity. Strikingly, these eugenicists continued using concepts of mutual aid and symbiosis even after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, having creatively repurposed them as a toolkit to negotiate the post-imperial transitions.<sup>40</sup>

## Eugenics of segregation: non-territorial autonomy, provincial professionals, and educational reform

Matthew Thomson notes that “mental disability was at the very forefront of eugenic anxieties and actions in the first decades of the twentieth century”.<sup>41</sup> Austria-Hungary was no exception. There, an interdisciplinary association of special educators, psychiatrists, and physical anthropologists played a crucial role in circulating a form of knowledge that Thomson calls “the eugenics of segregation”.<sup>42</sup> The *Verein Fürsorge*

---

36 Paul Weindling, Introduction, in: Hugo Iltis, *Race, Genetics, and Science. Resisting Racism in the 1930s*, Brno 2017, 25–42; Hugo Iltis, *Kampf und Gemeinschaft in Natur und Gesellschaft*, Prag 1926. The latter book indicates that Iltis continued drawing on this argument into the 1920s.

37 Paul Kammerer, *Nacionalizmus és biológia (Nationalism and Biology)*, in: *Huszadik Század* 15/5 (1914), 625–631.

38 René Berkovits, *Újabb tanulmányok a szociálbiológia köréből (New Studies from the Field of Social Biology)*, in: *Huszadik Század* 14/12 (1913), 610–621. In this article, Berkovits reviewed positively both a recent book by Géza von Hoffmann as well as Kammerer's new book on symbiosis.

39 Jaroslav Kříženecký, *Otázka dědičnosti získaných vlastností, její význam pro praxi eugenickou a úkoly politiky sociální (The Question of the Inheritance of Acquired Characteristics, Its Importance for Eugenic Practice and the Agendas of Social Policy)*, in: *Česká revue* 8/12 (1915), 719–739.

40 Vojtěch Pojar, *Mutual Aid and Symbiosis. The Trajectories of Two Concepts in Post-Imperial Transitions*, Paper presented at the conference *Discourses of Transition in (post-)Habsburg East Central Europe, 1917–1941*, Bratislava, May 25, 2022.

41 Mathew Thomson, *Disability, Psychiatry, and Eugenics*, in: Bashford/Levine (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook*, 2010, 116–133, 128.

42 Ibid.

für Schwachsinnige und Epileptische, as the association was called, was founded in 1902 with a clearly eugenic agenda. Assessing a decade of its work, a Viennese educator and one of the leading figures of the Verein, Hans Schiner, stated:

“The times when the care for the feeble-minded was regarded purely as charity are over. We realise that this care needs to be pursued from a social and national point of view [...]. The struggle against the causes of physical and mental degeneration is fought in the interest of the state.”<sup>43</sup>

As Jana Osterkamp shows in her illuminating study, the provinces of the late Habsburg Empire cooperated and pursued shared agendas, often without the mediation of the imperial centre.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, this was also true of the Verein, which promoted itself as an association bringing together professionals from various provinces. It published scientific journals on special education and organised regular conferences. Five such conferences took place before the war, between 1904 and 1912.<sup>45</sup> While the periodical *Eos* became a transnational forum for eugenic debates on mental disability, its conferences were attended by professionals linked to various provincial administrations. Even though most of them were recruited from the Alpine and Bohemian Lands, the conference participants also came from provinces as diverse as Bukovina, Galicia, Carniola, and from the Austrian Littoral. Crucially, these participants were not limited to self-identified Germans, but also included Poles, Ruthenians, Czechs, Slovenes, and even a few Italians.<sup>46</sup> Czech eugenicists, in particular, were influential in the association – the psychiatrist and educator Karel Herfort was its vice president – and published in its specialist periodical.<sup>47</sup> Thus, a transnational, ‘interprovincial’ circulation developed, reaching most parts of imperial Austria.

Members of the Verein appropriated Haeckel’s recapitulation theory and made it – along with the emerging Mendelian genetics and intelligence testing techniques – the core of their eugenic blueprint. According to Haeckel, individuals did

---

43 Hans Schiner, *Der Stand der Schwachsinnigenfürsorge in Österreich*, in: *Das schwachsinnige Kind im Lichte der neueren Forschung*, Band 3. Bericht der fünften österreichischen Konferenz der Schwachsinnigenfürsorge, Vienna 1912, 28–32, 31.

44 Jana Osterkamp, *Cooperative Empires. Provincial Initiatives in Imperial Austria*, in: *Austrian History Yearbook* 47 (2016), 128–146.

45 Ina Friedmann, *Die Heilpädagogische Abteilung der Wiener Universitätskinderklinik zwischen 1911 und 1977*, in: *Monatsschrift Kinderheilkunde* 168/Supplement 3 (2020), 154–162; Reinhard Sieder, *Das Dispositiv der Fürsorgeerziehung in Wien*, in: *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften* 25/1–2 (2014), 156–193. The debate about the discourses of disability in Austria focuses mainly on their local and national contexts. The institutions enabling a broader circulation of this knowledge, however, have received less attention.

46 *Das schwachsinnige Kind*, 1912, 184–188.

47 Karel Herfort/Artur Brožek, *Die eugenische Zentrale des Ernestinums*, in: *Eos* 10/3 (1914), 161–173.

not develop independently. Their development, instead, repeated the course of evolution previously taken by the entire species. This racist theory allowed these eugenically-inclined special educators to claim expertise on determining a child's alleged national belonging. Since the individual development mirrored the development of the 'race,' they argued, newborn children already bore distinctive markers of their belonging. As one Moravian special educator put it:

“A newborn [...] ontogenetically repeats the development of the human species. He [...] is hardwired to become a member of his closest kin, race, people [*Volk*], nature [...]. Many believe that children at such an [early] age are not very different as long as they belong to the same race or to a mixture of races that are extremely close to each other [...]. However, the dispositions are in harmony with race, so that a careful observer will not fail to notice some differences even in a newborn. Moreover, [...] the faces of some newborns start exhibiting a certain intelligence, while others appear more dull. If one then correlates the intelligence of children with their physical properties, one also sees [...] that those with duller facial expressions are more animalistic, i.e., more ontogenetically backward.”<sup>48</sup>

Moreover, in order to legitimise and pursue their agenda, these eugenicists sought for a global model. They found it in the arguments of the American eugenicist Henry H. Goddard. Advocating a hard hereditary approach to mental ability, Goddard pioneered the techniques of intelligence testing.<sup>49</sup> By publishing translations of his papers, referring to his research, and including him on the advisory board of its journal, the *Verein Fürsorge für Schwachsinnige und Epileptische* played a vital role in mediating Goddard's arguments in Austria-Hungary.<sup>50</sup> Associating disability with ethnicity, the eugenicists at the Verein ultimately called for the segregation of schoolchildren based on these markers.<sup>51</sup>

The crucial context for this eugenic project was imperial Austria's experiments with non-territorial autonomy, particularly a compromise concocted in 1905 by provincial politicians in Moravia that attempted to defuse the nationalist tensions in this province. The crucial part of the compromise concerned elections, introducing national voter registers. However, the compromise also transformed educa-

---

48 Franz Riedl, Wann und wieso wird Schwachsinn zur erblichen Abartung? Besserungsaussichten hierfür, in: *Das schwachsinnige Kind*, 1912, 160–178, 162.

49 On Goddard see, above all, Douglas Baynton, *Defectives in the Land. Disability and Immigration in the Age of Eugenics*, Chicago 2016.

50 Henry Goddard, *Sterilisation und Segregation*, in: *Eos* 10/1 (1914), 11–18.

51 Victoria Schmidt, *The Politics of Disability in Interwar and Socialist Czechoslovakia*, Amsterdam 2019, 61–75. In her important book, Schmidt highlights the importance of the intersections between disability and ethnicity in some eugenic discourses in interwar Czechoslovakia.

tion.<sup>52</sup> As Tara Zahra points out, the compromise was updated in 1910 so as to allow local officials to “assign both parents and children to a single national community” based on “objective characteristics”.<sup>53</sup> It thus “bolstered the claim that schools and schoolchildren were the property of nationalist movements, and that nationality was an inherited quality [...]”.<sup>54</sup> It is no coincidence, therefore, that two congresses on special education were held in Brünn/Brno, the capital of Moravia, shortly after the compromise had been updated. At one of these congresses, the discussions were conducted in German, at the other in Czech. However, there was an overlap between the organisers, including Herfort, and the participants of both events.<sup>55</sup> Tellingly, one of these congresses was attended by delegations of high-ranking officials from Bukovina and Galicia. While Bukovina introduced a compromise along the Moravian lines in 1909, Galician politicians compromised in 1914.<sup>56</sup> An unintended consequence of these experiments in reforming the empire was therefore that they fuelled the demand for biopolitical discourses. The prospect of political compromise between nationalists in different provinces of the empire thus propelled cooperation between various professionals and provided an incentive for the inter-provincial circulation of eugenic knowledge.

## Race against national indifference: nationalist activism, language frontiers of the empire, and eugenics

It is striking how many individuals in the rural areas of the Habsburg Empire embraced eugenics. The key context for the circulation of eugenic knowledge in these areas was nationalist activism.<sup>57</sup> Pieter Judson shows how nationalist activists on the language frontiers of the empire sought to claim the rural populace for their own groups. Yet, they were confronted with a widespread multilingualism and cultural hybridity. Subsuming them under the concept of ‘national indifference’, Tara Zahra argues that the “tensions between nationalist aspirations and popular responses to their demands often propelled political change and radicalization in modern East

---

52 Bórries Kuzmany, Habsburg Austria. Experiments in Non-Territorial Autonomy, in: *Ethnopolitics* 15/1 (2016), 43–65.

53 Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls. National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900–1948*, Ithaca 2008, 14.

54 *Ibid.*

55 *Das schwachsinnige Kind*, 1912, 184–188; *Druhý český sjezd pro péči o slabomyslné a školství pomocné* (The Second Czech Congress for the Care of the Feeble-minded and Special Education), Prague 1912, 223–234.

56 Kuzmany, *Habsburg Austria*, 2016, 52–58.

57 Pieter Judson, *Guardians of the Nation. Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria*, Cambridge, MA 2006.

Central Europe”.<sup>58</sup> Confronted with national indifference, some nationalist medical doctors abandoned cultural policies. Instead of culture, they claimed, nationalists had to act directly in the realm of biology. Drawing mainly on race hygiene from Imperial Germany, they retooled its concepts for the purposes of unmaking national indifference.

Nationalist associations assumed the role of brokers between these activists. In January 1914, informal exchanges between such associations materialised into a new body that amalgamated a eugenic agenda with a *völkisch* ideology. The *Deutsch-österreichische Beratungsstelle für Volkswohlfahrt* was founded jointly by the representatives of the Südmark – which aimed to contest spaces simultaneously claimed by Slovene and/or Italian nationalist activists – and some of its counterparts from Bohemia, including the *Böhmerwaldbund* and the *Bund der Deutschen in Böhmen*. According to its founders, the Beratungsstelle was a voluntary association with the aim of establishing a nationalist welfare network. Race hygiene was high on its broad biopolitical agenda, along with the related issues of child and youth welfare, temperance, and nationalist tourism.<sup>59</sup> However, this inter-rural regime of knowledge circulation was not limited to imperial Austria. Consider the *Sächsisches Wehr- und Mehrbuch*, a popular calendar with eugenic content, published in 1914 by Transylvanian Saxon nationalist activists. An entire chapter of the calendar was written by an author from Graz about the goals and practices of the Südmark.<sup>60</sup> In turn, the book was almost instantly reviewed on the pages of the *Deutsche Arbeit*, a leading periodical of German nationalist activists in Bohemia. The reviewer argued that the book was “a model showing how to practice journalistic nationalist education in our land [...]”.<sup>61</sup> Nationalist associations thus facilitated the circulation of eugenic knowledge between the activists located on the various language frontiers of the Habsburg Empire.

Throughout the empire, nationalist activists who embraced eugenics repeated some typical arguments. Heinrich Siegmund, a physician whom Tudor Georgescu rightly identifies as “the founding father of Saxon eugenics” and an editor of the aforementioned calendar, can serve as an example here.<sup>62</sup> First, he portrayed the lan-

---

58 Tara Zahra, *Imagined Noncommunities. National Indifference as a Category of Analysis*, in: *Slavic Review* 69/1 (2010), 93–119, 98.

59 *Gründung einer deutsch-österreichischen Beratungsstelle für Volkswohlfahrt*, in: *Mitteilungen des Vereines Südmark* 9/1–2 (1914), 9–11.

60 Wilhelm Heinz, *Der deutsch-wirtschaftliche Schutzverein Südmark*, in: Heinrich Siegmund/Michael Englisch/Rudolf Schuster (eds.), *Sächsisches Wehr- und Mehrbuch. Ein Volksbuch*, Mediasch 1914, 147–154.

61 Hermann Ullmann, *Ein vorbildliches Volksbuch aus dem nationalen Kampf*, in: *Deutsche Arbeit* 13/12 (1914), 766.

62 Tudor Georgescu, *The Eugenic Fortress. Alfred Csallner and the Saxon Eugenic Discourse in Inter-war Romania*, in: Christian Promitzer/Sevasti Trubeta/Marius Turda (eds.), *Health, Hygiene and*

guage frontiers as a site of struggle for existence, which manifested itself most pronouncedly in the struggle for land. Second, he argued that eugenics provided crucial tools for strengthening national consciousness. According to Siegmund, peasants could be made into nationalists through an actual act of breeding: “If we aim to increase national consciousness, we must ensure that particularly those members of the nation who clearly possess national consciousness marry.”<sup>63</sup> Third, using the racist trope of racial purity, he claimed that interactions between neighbouring groups posed a danger to the national community: “Each and every nation that possesses mental qualities suffers irreparable losses when it mixes with individuals of inferior racial stock.”<sup>64</sup> Nationalist activists such as Siegmund thus embraced race hygiene as a strategy for dividing and disentangling mixed populations on the language frontiers of the empire.

It may seem paradoxical that this circulation of knowledge was, in effect, transnational. Yet motivated by symbolic competition, nationalist activists of all stripes – including Uroš Krulj from Mostar, František Lašek from Litomyšl/Leitomyšl, and Laza Marković from Novi Sad/Újvidék – drew on similar intellectual resources as their competitors contesting the same spaces, and their texts bore family resemblances. The Serb nationalist physician Marković, for example, was informed by the texts on race hygiene from Imperial Germany. He therefore made almost identical arguments as Siegmund, even though there is nothing to suggest that he was familiar with his texts beforehand. He claimed that eugenics provided the key to forming a new national consciousness, strongly opposed intermarriage with other ethnic groups, and alleged that these groups were engaging in a zero-sum struggle for existence with the Serbs:

“If [...] every Serb family remains healthy and is blessed with healthy and agile children, then the entire nation will be healthy, agile, growing, and happy. It will protect and expand its homes and its lands. It will defend its place in a [...] struggle that every nation wages with its neighbours.”<sup>65</sup>

A Czech nationalist from eastern Bohemia, František Lašek, exemplifies the last feature shared by the nationalist activists from the language frontiers. Drawing on Max

---

Eugenics in Southeastern Europe to 1945, Budapest 2011, 351–384, 354. The definitive account is Tudor Georgescu, *The Eugenic Fortress. The Transylvanian Saxon Experiment in Interwar Romania*, New York 2016.

63 Heinrich Siegmund, *Zur sächsischen Hygiene IV*, in: *Siebenbürgisch-Deutsches Tageblatt*, 3 March 1901, 1.

64 Heinrich Siegmund, *Über Rassenreinheit und Wert einer guten Abstammung*, in: Siegmund/Englisch/Schuster (eds.), *Sächsisches Wehr- und Mehrbuch*, 1913, 74–78, 77.

65 Laza Marković, *Ženidba i udadba ili kako će narod doći do dobrog podmlatka (Marriage or How Can the People Get Good Progeny)*, Novi Sad 1913, 50–51.

von Gruber and Wilhelm Schallmayer, Lašek singled out feminism as the main biological threat to the national community:

“Eugenics opposes the eccentric demands of the women’s movement, or feminism. The women’s movement is a serious threat to eugenics and racial hygiene. [...] The nation pays with the loss of several children for every step towards the independence of women.”<sup>66</sup>

Indeed, an anti-feminism that sought to control women’s behaviour was commonplace among these eugenicists and intersected with their emphasis on racial purity. Far from being confined to a single region, nationalist activism on the language frontiers of the Habsburg Empire was thus a transnational phenomenon that allowed for exchange between various groups in a rather disturbing way.

## Conclusion

Eugenic knowledge circulated within the Habsburg Empire, easily crossing its cultural divides. At the same time, eugenics served as a tool for the cognitive management of imperial diversity. While substantiating these key arguments, this paper has also demonstrated that there were several conflicting ways in which eugenicists related to the empire. Some eugenicists, based in the largest urban centres, attempted to use eugenic knowledge to imagine and legitimise the empire as an environment that facilitated unity in diversity. Others, mainly professionals involved in provincial administration and education, sought to use eugenics as a tool of ascribing nationality to individuals, and ultimately segregating them. Finally, some nationalist activists on the empire’s language frontiers imagined extreme forms of eugenics as an instrument of suppressing national indifference and brutally disentangling the mixed rural populations. The differences between various national cultures were thus less important for these eugenic blueprints than the purpose that this knowledge was intended to serve.

These findings on eugenics in the late Habsburg Empire contribute to the recent research on the geographies of knowledge production in the continental empires. Deborah Coen argues that the gap between knowledge produced in the imperial metropolis and in the provinces was much smaller in these empires that spanned Europe and Asia during the long nineteenth century.<sup>67</sup> The “late imperial sciences” that operated in the vast spaces of these empires developed novel “languages of

---

<sup>66</sup> František Lašek, *Zušlechtění lidstva. Eugenika (Breeding Mankind. Eugenics)*, Prague 1916, 24–25.

<sup>67</sup> Coen, *Climate*, 2018, 9.

self-description”, establishing “the hybridity of their populations and territories as empirical facts”.<sup>68</sup> In other words, Coen shows that these empires did not make society ‘legible’ in the same way as nation states did; instead, “seeing like a state” meant “bringing imperial diversity into sharper focus”.<sup>69</sup> So far, the debates of eugenicists in the urban centres of the late Habsburg Empire that involved notions such as symbiosis or mutual aid fit well into this picture of the late imperial sciences. Unlike these late imperial sciences, however, eugenics in Austria-Hungary did not undermine the reified category of ‘race’. Yet, paradoxically, some of its advocates went on to posit human biological plasticity as a material precondition for the empire’s integrative role.

---

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.; Coen’s analysis complicates the argument advanced by James Scott, *Seeing like a State. How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, New Haven 1998.