

Echoes of the Eugenic Movement from Interwar Romania in Communist Pronatalist Practices

Andreea Poenaru

Abstract: The present article dwells on the idea of the empowerment of women as it was used by the Communist regime. Eugenics, a field much discussed in inter-war Romania, was the main tool in controlling women. The principles of this science, related to the idea of biology as destiny, were adopted and applied so that the private sphere became public. My thesis is that even if these principles were used in the communist strategy in order to strengthen the nation, in fact, their core aspect – reproduction – became only a means for increasing work force and in the end weakened the family and implicitly the nation.

Keywords: birth control, Communism, Eugenics, family, women's empowerment.

Introduction

The feminine problem was already included in the documents for the Congress of the Establishment of the Communist Party. Nina Neuvrit was chosen as the reporting person for the feminine movement and she presented a paragraph regarding feminine organizations that assured the public that there was a real participation of women in political life and a real recognition of their role in this field. In fact, the aim was the indoctrination of a certain social section that, by its maternal role, educated the future members of the socialist society. There was no fight for women's rights anymore. They were offered by the Party. The ideal was imposed by the State – a woman had to wish for the propagation of Communist principles, a fact that guaranteed her a superior state than the previous. In fact, women's roles were defined especially through the principles of Eugenics. What was the role of Eugenics in this scenario and how was its impact on population, especially on women? I will try to answer these questions by showing how the ideas of the eugenicists were inserted in the communist political discourse regarding women.

Eugenics in Interwar Romania

Between 1918 and 1947, doctors, anthropologists, biologists, lawyers, sociologists, and other scholars from the field of social science adopted the theory of biologic determinism with the aim of re-asserting the role that the State would

play in assuring the progress of humanity (of the nation defined from a biological point of view) according to eugenic principles.

As Dr. Gheorghe Banu asserted in an article published in *Revista de igienă socială* (Social Hygiene Magazine), Eugenics is a science that studies the factors that are under the control of the society, susceptible of modifying physical or mental race features and whose purpose is to hinder the procreation of inferior, degenerate (dysgenic) elements, which tend, at one moment, to overcome the normal elements (Banu 1935, 101). Why was Eugenics needed? An explanation comes from the pages of the same magazine: in order to neutralize infection (syphilis), toxic (alcoholism), and social (insufficient food) factors (Banu 1935, 102). Other reasons present themselves as follows.

First, before 1918, giving birth and nurture were, as it is natural, closely connected with the private sphere. From 1923 these processes became public and political. The eugenicists delimited the politicization of the private life by identifying women's rights and responsibilities with their reproductive functions (Bucur 1995, 128). In my opinion, the rise of Eugenics did not serve women's empowerment at all. Not because they should not have given birth, but because of the pressure put on them and of the dramatic turn that it took.

Secondly, after the creation of the Greater Romania the eugenicists were among those who believed that there was the need of modernizing the newly created state using traditions. They concentrated their rhetoric and strategy on improving the national biologic capital and implicitly on women who seemed to be promising actors in the modernizing process if they were to assume the traditional roles of mothers and use their natural feminine gifts of compassion and kindness in the public sphere. The vision of a healthier and more prosperous nation centered, this time, on concepts regarding the various roles that were to be played by men and women – different roles according to hereditary and biological differences (Bucur 2002, 107).

I will include here the opinion of Professor Iuliu Moldovan because he was considered to be the leader of the movement. He viewed women's movement, feminism, as a form of individualism that was contrary to women's eugenic destiny. According to his work, *Biopolitics*, which was a kind of guide for the new movement, the woman had to have a decisive role:

(...) in all matters that regard the very essence of the community, further in education, in protection, and in household and it is good that she would be offered a consultative vote in solving all other needs that arise or could arise in the life of a community as it is in matrimony (Moldovan 1926, 80).

In other words, the woman participates in the public life, but this involvement:

could not be done in the same extensive or intensive manner as the man because the woman is the protector, the main factor that keeps the family closely knit and her main task is maintaining the purity and the natural evolution of this central entity, unique as regards its importance for the future (Moldovan 1926, 81).

Nevertheless, Iuliu Moldovan's interest in women's problems is contrasted by other contemporary analyses. His trust in the Romanian women's availability of taking part in the political life was very high in 1936. He asserted his support for women's right to vote that was necessary for modernization. At the same time, he pointed to the fact that women had to take care of this process, organizing themselves and becoming more active in the field of welfare work, precisely for gaining the right to vote (Moldovan 1926, 75). This attitude is remarkable and, in comparison to the eugenicists from other parts of the world – especially those from the United Kingdom, France, and the USA –, unique. Even if in these countries, women were an important part of the electorate, directly affected by eugenicists' ideas and programme, they were not offered the empowerment in the political sphere. In Romania, the eugenic arguments for women's empowerment were promising radical changes regarding gender roles in the political arena, in the context of a feminist movement that was less numerous and less organized. Still, Moldovan's attitude proved to be just a mere strategy through which he wanted to dilute the appeal of feminist groups' rhetoric. Even if he seemed to accept the idea of women's suffrage easily, he was to use this argument in order to capitalize on the maternal qualities for the fulfilling of the common good and not for guaranteeing women's access to any job or way of empowerment in the public sphere. The implications of this attitude proved to be profound: even if the eugenicists wanted to separate the public from the private space, they were actually trying to bring both in the political sphere thus placing the State in a position of control (Bucur 2002, 112).

The purpose was to create a strong feminist organization within the State framework, which could have validated the mother's characteristics and fight for biological purity. In this context, concerning girls' education, Valeria Căliman advised that they were not to be encouraged to practice intellectual jobs because it would have stopped them from dedicating to their true mission. "The woman-clerk, the woman with material independence would not be attracted by the real family life. What is allowed for a woman endowed with special traits can be fatal for a woman that wants just to acquire a certain good by studies." (Căliman 1942, 126) The woman, as an eugenic being is an instrument for the eugenic strengthening of the nation (Căliman 1942). The exceptional women were viewed as a deviation from the normal. The few cases of exceptional women were either unmarried or sterile; persons who had wasted their admirable qualities without the possibility of transmitting them to the future generations.

In the pages of *Buletin pentru Eugenie și Biopolitică* (Bulletin for Eugenics and Biopolitics), a publication of Astra society, Maria Băiulescu, the president of the Romanian Women Union, supported the idea of biology as destiny – women were, in the first place, procreative. Within this equation, birth and nurture became political imperatives; it was a woman's duty to strengthen the nation (Bucur 1995).

The main issue was, obviously, the family, one of the victims of modernization. The eugenicists did not condemn women's modernization as a threat to the health of the nation. They just preferred isolating certain enemies. The favourite scapegoat was the feminists and also, generally, all women who had used the opportunities offered by modernization with the supposed aim of escaping maternal responsibilities. It was not the industrialization, the economic instability, and the cheap, unqualified work market that were condemned, but women's ambitions or their wrong perspective regarding day to day economic problems. Instead of looking for solutions for protecting the health of the family and especially that of children, women had to respond to economic pressure by taking a job outside the household. The eugenicists identified women with household responsibilities and the man with the public ones, so they could not see that the two spheres were in fact permanently overlapping (Bucur 2002, 115).

Furthermore, I think that the politicization of the private sphere seems to have simplified a growing control on women's life and, consequently, established a more severe limitation of their social authority and roles. Nevertheless, at least in the beginning, the situation had been different. Leaders of women's organizations, as Maria Băiulescu, adopted the eugenic definition of women's social roles as a means of acquiring a stronger social status and a more clear recognition of the mother and of the wife.

In early eugenic writings, women were portrayed as moral guardians of the future in a way that resembled the model of the republican maternity from USA and France. The eugenicists described these roles not only as natural but also as a fulfillment of women's specific qualities. They were a source of moral authority and could make the most important contributions to the future health of the nation (Bucur 2002, 119). At the Women's Union Congress in September 1931, Maria Băiulescu stated that "family is a hereditary tree which supports the State; the strength of the family is the woman. If this foundation were shaken, the end of moral order, of belief, and also of a people would certainly come" (quoted in Bucur 2002, 118).

In the 30s, when women made a shift in their interests from asking the true recognition of the mother and of the wife to requiring the right to vote on an equal basis, the tone of the eugenic analysis changed. The eugenicists stopped worshipping the noble institution of maternity and women as guardians of morality. They started to concentrate on feminists' dysgenic actions, on the abandon of the household, and on the dangerous behaviour of those women that entered interethnic marriages. Consequently, there appeared the necessity of imposing negative eugenic measures in the context in which the idea of race purification was more and more popular in Germany and Italy. A discourse of fear and exclusion was on the rise, accompanied by a limitation of woman's role in society (Bucur 1995, 138).

Many authors saw the interethnic marriages as a threat for healthy social relations. They employed a double approach. First, these marriages would have

diminished the background of the human eugenic capital. Secondly, the chances that the children resulted from these families would grow up identifying themselves as non-Romanian, were higher and this represented a danger for the health of the nation.

Eugenics Principles in Communist Key

A problem that resulted from employing eugenic principles in the political sphere was the fact that the Communist regime managed to plan, in the end, all the aspects of the private life. They were under public surveillance through measures that resembled those proposed by eugenicists, among which there were the elaborating of individual genealogical files, forced divorces, and the criminalization of abortions.

The eugenic ideas re-emerged once with the debates regarding abortion in the 1960s. There was a reinvigoration of the eugenic discourse from the 1920s regarding the relations between the State and the individual. In early Communism, the control over abortion was not strict. In fact, it was completely decriminalized at the end of the '50s when the regime legalized abortion by decree no 463 from September 30, 1957. In a time when rapid industrialization was one of the main objectives of the State leadership and especially of the new General Secretary, the lowering of birthrate could have been an omen.

While Ceaușescu and the other leaders were signaling this problem publicly, Petre Râmneanțu, an old disciple of Iuliu Moldovan, started, in his turn, to send various memoranda concerning the same issue. He described the decrease of the birth rate in Romania as a degenerative phenomenon, suggesting a series of reforms that would have made the problem disappear. Râmneanțu's language and measures were very close to the inter-war ideas regarding the control of women's access to reproductive means and the promotion of a responsible behaviour (in eugenic meaning) of sexually mature couples. The memorandum insisted on the efficient education of women, their responsibilities as mothers, and also on the need of introducing genetic conscience on all levels of education (Bucur 2002, 140). Another issue was abortion.

Râmneanțu requested the criminalization of abortion and the control of the State over all means of contraception. He recommended the punishment of both mothers and the medical personnel that assisted the abortions. He also suggested stimulators for reproduction by increasing the alimony for children proportionally with their number. It is not known if the analysis caused a direct answer from the Health ministry and from Ceaușescu, but it is certain that on the 1st of October, 1966 the Parliament promulgated the Decree no 770 which re-criminalized abortion (Bucur 2002).

In Romania, the link that was established between demographic issues and nationalist policies transformed women's bodies into instruments for the use of the State. The paternalistic State exercised its authority partially by elaborating a discourse and practices centered on family. Women's entrance into the public

sphere would have led to their liberation. The nation was to be re-built through a neo-Stalinist project in social engineering called 'homogenization' with the aim of creating the new socialist man.

The homogeneity elaborated in the 80's was aimed at achieving social equality by making social differences insignificant. Race, gender, ethnicity were to be homogenized. Persons were to be recognized by their contribution to the building of socialism and not by what made them different from one another. People existed only in the public sphere of the State. The main contribution of the family was in the eugenic field of reproduction and, implicitly, in that of work force and of spiritual reproduction – youth education and integration in society (Kligman 1992, 365).

The political reconstruction of the family was a fundamental component of socialist transformation. When the reaching of this purpose was considered to be necessary, there came laws, decrees, and normative documents. These normative stipulations had vital importance for the efforts of the new regime that wanted to restructure social relations so that they would become compatible with the political and economic organization of the Socialist State. These measures regarded the family, the relations between sexes and generations, the attitude regarding human reproduction and mutual relations within the family, and the structural process of creating a new socio-political system. In 1955 the laws regarding abortion were revised. They specified the conditions in which women had the right to interrupt their pregnancy legally. In 1956 the State introduced financial assistance for families with children. In 1957 the policy regarding abortion was revised again and, this time, abortion was liberalized (Kligman 2000, 90).

The Communist Party used the legislative activity in order to reshape the relation between the public and the private spheres so that the latter would become, willy-nilly, a partner in the radical project of changing the society. In Communism, a social category that had been deprived of rights in the past was viewed as a target for the discourse and strategies connected to emancipation and social progress. The aim was that of illustrating the success of the new policies and the transformation that resulted from them.

In defining the project of the woman's involvement in the public space, the Communist Party that had taken the lead after the war, had to integrate a series of compelling factors among which the first was the socialist rule of the democratic game that presupposed the proclamation and juridical regulation of the equality between men and women. The assimilation of the Soviet model imposed conditions for the access to positions of responsibility and to all jobs, for social protection, material and symbolical support (Cîrstocea 2002, 127).

Equality was one of the fundamental ideological doctrines of the Socialist states and constituted an important element of the official political discourse. The publication of the Family Code meant the official recognition, through law, of the equality between women and men in the private sphere, i.e. in family life.

Women's equality with men in the public sphere was guaranteed by the Constitution. Thus, the new political regime broke up with the past radically and redefined the border line between the public and the private officially. The State claimed its paternalist rights of protecting the family and determining the reproductive cycles. The interest conflict that resulted from the target figures and the circumstances of the daily life were reflected in the life of the women who suffered the bitter consequences (Cîrstocea 2002, 54). There was no intention of really liberate the woman. On the contrary, she was only viewed as a supplementary work force for the great industrial projects. As in any totalitarian regime, the annulment of the individual leads to the lack of meaning of the private life generally and of the family in particular.

The political manipulation of abortion and the contraceptive practices explains partly why the reproduction policy constitutes such an important area for the confrontation between the State and the interests of its citizens. The legislation regarding reproduction brought the State directly in the private territory of its citizens' bodies (Cîrstocea 2002, 55).

It seems that the legalization of abortion was also influenced by other geo-political factors. In 1956 the Soviet Communism had its first major crisis. Hungary, Poland, and Democrat Germany revolted against the Soviet domination. Many Romanian students and intellectuals from the university centers in Bucharest, Cluj, Timișoara asserted their solidarity with the Hungarian insurrection. Even if the agents of the Militia State repressed all their activities, the wave of arrests and expulsion aggravated the relation between the State and population. The liberalization of abortion was one of the stimuli offered to the people in order to diminish the tensions and change the image of the regime (Cîrstocea 2002, 60).

The moment when women's history in Romania showed an existence of itself was the autumn of 1966 when the law interdicted the deliberate interruption of pregnancy for women that had less than four children and were under 40. The birth rate had lowered to 14 to 1000 inhabitants and this was a sign of diminishing the work force and a threat to the rhythm of industrialization. So, there was no talk about real moral principle. From that moment on, birth became a competence of the State. Consequently, there appeared the paradoxical situation in which the woman had the possibility of having any position she wanted, legally, but she was deprived of the right over her body (Raduly 1996, 174). As I mentioned before, that was not a moralizing campaign, but a violent intrusion. Abortion was not a murder, but an act against the State which needed workers.

The preoccupation for women's health came from the wish to control the means of reproduction. The numerical growth of population was a political objective. Consequently, from 1984 women that could have children had the obligation of undertaking an oncologic control that was aimed at finding out if they did not break the law by using contraceptive means (Deletant 1997, 175).

Ceaușescu's 'humanism' proved to be misogynism. Women were accepted and praised as workers for the socialist process, as mothers and good

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householders, but they were viewed as deviant, as “a reflection of the decadent imperialism” (Băban 2003, 390) if they tried to enjoy life by dedicating themselves to art and literature and if they showed personal aspiration.

Conclusion

This financial and moral support was in fact not for mothers and children as human beings, but for the work force that they represented and that served the purposes of the Communist Party. The image of the woman tended to be even more primitive than that of the eugenic movement. The official discourse showed her as a keeper of traditions, an educator, and a bearer of moral values but, in fact, the woman was just a means of reproduction, a good of the State that had to be used in the interest of the nation.

It is ironical in a way: we may still remember that until 1989 one of the very few specialties for children (and not only) was a kind of biscuit called ‘Eugenia.’ But this can be viewed only as a joke for connoisseurs. I think everybody who was a child then knows how it tasted, but we did not fully know the trials that our mothers went through as ‘liberated’ women who had the ‘right’ to work day and night, in three shifts, but did not have the right to see their children grow. I am referring here to the social product that occurred in the process: the so-called ‘generation with the key hanging around the neck.’ We who were children then may have happy memories because that is what we were – children, but our parents still shudder at the memories from the famous factories and plants, the laboratories of the false women’s freedom and equality. In the hands of the Communist Party, Eugenics was the tool of transforming the private sphere into a political instrument and it proved to be a hindrance for the evolution of the family welfare.

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