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EUGENICS AND MENTAL HYGIENE IN BRAZIL AT THE TURN OF THE 19TH CENTURY TO THE 20TH CENTURY

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Abstract: Galton's thinking about Eugenia ("good generation"), coined late in the nineteenth century, soon became a school, meeting supporters around the world and marking new research within the field of biology, genetics primarily, and as will be seen further from psychiatry. In this text, the main objective is to understand how this discourse, transformed into practice by scientists of various areas, was appropriated by psychiatric science orienting the practices of the alienists in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, especially in Brazil.

Keywords: Eugenics, genetics, hygiene, psychiatry.

INTRODUCTION

The term "eugenics" was first used at the end of the 20th century, by the English anthropologist, mathematician e statistician, Sir Francis Galton. Influenced by the theory of evolution, proposed by his cousin, Charles Darwin in his book published in 1859, "The Origin of the Species", Galton conceived of eugenics as "the study of the agencies under social control, that improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations either physically or mentally". Defined thus, it was an experimental science whose aim was to improve the human stock by means of artificial selection. In summary, eugenics was the study of genetic and social factors which could either improve, or impair future generations of peoples, physically, morally, and mentally.

Galton first used the term eugenics in his work, *Human Faculty*, published in 1883. In this work, Galton investigated the fields of human faculties, especially innate morality, and intellect, and argued that it would be possible not only to change races, but also to create a new superior race. His methodology was to identify "successful" families and individuals in a race, and by superimposing actual portraits of these peoples, identify a

physiognomy for the "ideal", and "typical" member of this racial group. Procreation of those with characteristics of this ideal, "normal" individual were to be encouraged, while those who deviated from this ideal were to be restricted. His main objective was to demonstrate that eugenics could be used to improve the English race, by means of incentivizing the procreation of peoples of superior "stock", and restricting as much as possible, those deemed inferior. Eugenics would use tools of population control, such as regulations re who could marry, birth control, mechanisms to control mortality, all supported by information gathered from ongoing demographic and statistical studies of the population.

The idea that it could be possible to "catch up" with a strong, "superior" race by means of genetic and biological control of populations, was an attractive idea for many governments, and ensured that Galton's theories spread to various parts of the world. His writings served as the theoretical, methodological and practical basis for various scientific research projects in the fields of biology and genetics, and were also utilized to support racist, genetic reductionist and nationalist ideas in various countries at the end of the 19th, and more particularly at the beginning of the 20th century. Eugenics became integral to scientific and social reform projects, influencing psychology, psychiatry, and biology, and gradually gained greater scientific and institutional legitimacy, supported by Eugenics societies, academic publications, and health and education campaigns.

In general, eugenics followed two strands: on the one hand, *positive eugenics* (favoring of the "superior" races) and on the other hand, *negative eugenics* (disappearance of the "inferior" races). The first case aimed, through pedagogical measures and educational campaigns, to encourage the procreation

of individuals considered “superior”, both physically and mentally. In the second case, the idea was to eliminate individuals considered “inferior”, in order to prevent the process of race degeneration and the degradation of the human species. In short, the main objective was the “improvement” of qualities and the reduction of imperfections as much as possible, even if this meant that the weakest had to be eliminated.

It is important to highlight that eugenic theories in Brazil were developed in the context of significant social, political and economic changes, which were happening in the country at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. These changes, alongside significant improvements, brought a series of challenges, principally an increase in the levels of poverty in the country, with many people living in conditions of very poor hygiene and sanitation. Many politicians, intellectuals and public authorities identified these issues as the root of the country's lack of development, and therefore hygiene and sanitation programmes, and eugenics, held a strong appeal as means to achieve the regeneration of the country. The national ideal of “Ordem e Progresso” (Order and Progress), which until today is written on the Brazilian flag, was based on the principle that a nation would only be worthy of respect when it was led by “superior” peoples, superior both physically and intellectually. In this context, Eugenics was seen as supporting the need for close control of the population, not only to inhibit the reproduction of those deemed to be genetically inferior, but also to incentivize the reproduction of those deemed genetically superior.

In Brazil, eugenics was closely linked with sanitary and hygiene improvement campaigns and seen as complimentary in combatting factors causing the psychological, physical, and moral degradation of the population, particularly of the poor and the marginalized.

Eugenics ideas formed part of the basis for public health and preventative medicine, focused on combating risks to health such as syphilis, alcoholism and tuberculosis, and sought a gradual improvement in the Nation's health and wellbeing. The first Eugenics Society in South America, created on the 15th of January 1918, to support such campaigns, was the “Sociedade Eugênica de Sao Paulo” (The Eugenics Society of Sao Paulo). The Society functioned for one year only, however during this time, supported several conferences dealing with themes such as the improvement of the human “stock” and enhancement of the genetic wellbeing of the population.

None the less, the institution in Brazil which most consistently supported the development of eugenic ideas and practices was the Brazilian League for Mental Hygiene, “Liga Brasileira de Higiene Mental” (LBHM), founded by Gustavo Riedel in Rio de Janeiro in 1922. According to Gilberto Hochman, Researcher at Oswaldo Cruz Foundation, the LBHM emerged as a means of supporting the development of eugenic ideas and practices, ratifying “disciplinary parameters, which should guarantee the formation of a healthy population, without conflicts” (HOCHMAN, 1998, p. 132). By this means, eugenics occupied a central position in Brazilian medical and psychiatric thinking, principally re the possibility of intervening to reduce the incidence of mental illness and hence improve the mental wellbeing of the population. The leaders of the LBHM included the leading psychiatrists of their day, many of whom worked in the Faculty of Medicine of Rio de Janeiro, and the National Hospital of Alienated people (HNA). The LBHM sought in eugenics, and in Morel's theories of degeneration, an organic explanation for mental illnesses that would support the scientific basis of psychiatry in Brazil, thus enhancing its international reputation. Biological eugenics

fundamentally transformed the ideological and scientific practice of public health policies, legitimizing the ideas and practices of doctors, psychiatrists, scientists, politicians, and intellectuals of this period, who defended the use of direct means of intervention in the control of the population, via eugenic practices.

LAMARCKISM VERSUS MENDELISM: EVOLUTIONIST THEORIES IN BRAZIL

To understand eugenics in Brazil, it is important to first understand the theories of evolution developed in the nineteenth century and their relationship to theories of heredity, paying particular attention to the doctrines defended by Jean-Baptiste Pierre Lamarck, Charles Darwin, August Weissmann and Gregor Mendel. In general, Lamarck's theory of "acquired character inheritance", or adaptation theory, was prevalent in the nineteenth century. According to this theory, traits developed during the life of an organism would be passed on to its descendants. Reaffirmed by Darwin's theory of "Pangenesis", adaptation theory has given the environment an important role in the formation of hereditary characteristics. In general, this theory suited the concerns and pessimism about the modernity and future of humanity that marked Western countries at the turn of the century. Nancy Stepan, a historian from Columbia University, notes that, at this time, the causes of degeneration came to be attributed to addiction, crime, immigration, female labor and the urban environment, that is, "the conviction that many of the common diseases among the poor were hereditary - tuberculosis, syphilis, alcoholism, mental illness - the fear of social decay has been overcome" (Stepan, 2005: 32).

In the early decades of the twentieth century, Lamarck's theory began to be questioned,

giving way to "germplasm theories, developed by Weissmann and, above all, to "genetics theories" developed by Gregor Mendel. In general, Weissmann's theory advocated a difference between the body - the tissues and organs - and the reproductive cells. While the body could be modified by external influences exerted on the organism, the germinal plasma would be fixed and could not suffer any alteration. Thus, the offspring would be the result of the germ cells of their parents, with the body only the carrier of germplasm. In other words, the characteristics developed in the organism would be restricted to it and could not be transmitted to the descendants. Starting from the arrangement and recombination of hereditary characteristics in plants, Mendel also sought to demonstrate that the acquired characteristics could not be transmitted hereditarily. During the interbreeding between different plant species, he observed the stability of the characteristics, which in turn resurfaced unchanged in subsequent generations. Mendel's conviction that his findings in plants could be extended to animals and humans contributed to the development of modern genetics in the twentieth century.

The idea that a condition or behavior would be fixed, inherent in the individual, has served as a justification for eugenic thinking and practice in vogue in many countries because - considering that nothing could be done to change a genetically determined condition or behavior - the only thing to do would be to "prevent the condition from being transmitted to future generations through reproduction" (Stepan, 2005: 35). Thus, "negative eugenics," widely practiced in some countries, such as Sweden, Denmark, Germany, and the United States, found theoretical and scientific legitimacy in the Mendelian theory of the fixity of hereditary characteristics. Thus, "the lower classes, which

reproduced in the tenements (cortiços) and slums (favelas), the permanently unemployed, the poor alcoholics, the mentally ill in insane asylums” became “targets of the agitation of eugenicists” (Stepan, 2005: 37).

Overall, from the early decades of the twentieth century, the predominance of Mendelian theory in eugenic policies and campaigns around the world was unquestionable. In countries such as England and Germany, for example, Mendelism, along with Weissmann’s theory of germplasm, “seemed to give precision and certainty to claims about the importance and significance of heredity.” In general, sociological explanations gave way to practical applications of genetics to solve population problems. In other words, “the new [Mendelian] genetics led eugenicists to abandon social reforms, preferring biological ones, because they understood that the effects of social reforms would be limited to a single generation” (Stepan, 2005: 76).

According to Mendelian genetics, education and hygiene could never prevent the decay of peoples and the human species. No matter how perfect educational and hygienic measures were, such as public welfare policies, or the encouragement of sport and physical education, none of this could change heredity. In short, a germinating constitution of an individual is always the same and could not be changed by the external environment.

In Brazil, although some thinkers defended the Mendelian theory of fixed characters, such as the agronomist Octavio Domingues, eugenics had a more Lamarckism orientation; It was generally believed that outside influences could not only cause the degeneration of the human species, but also help to overcome it. This divergence in thinking from the countries where eugenics was most developed and studied - Britain, Sweden, Denmark, the United States, for example - can be understood from two

aspects: the first concerns social, political and economic peculiarities of the country; The second point refers to the development of scientific ideas, especially medical ones, in the first decades of the twentieth century.

From a social point of view, the Lamarckism theory served as a model for understanding degenerations via the relationship between heredity and environment. So, for social ills, social remedies were required. It was believed that hygiene and sanitation, as well as the eugenic education of the population, would be able to contribute to the sanitation of the race and the regeneration of the people. Regarding the development of medicine, Nancy Stepan shows that Brazilian scientific circles, especially the physician, were profoundly Francophile, and as French biology, at least until the late 1930s, had serious reservations about Mendelism, maintaining a strong bond to the social-biological ideas of Lamarckist theory, Brazilian science also remained strongly Lamarckist. Thus, “Lamarckian ideas constituted the context in which long-standing concerns about progress, health, and nationality converged on the new eugenic institutions of Latin America in a social and scientific process that lasted several years” (Stepan, 2005: 84- 85).

The main representative of the lamarckist strand of eugenics in Brazil was the doctor-psychiatrist Renato Kehl, who was also the main diffuser of the ideas of Francis Galton and the promoter of the eugenic campaign in the country. In addition to heredity, descent, and evolution, he considered issues relating to environmental influences, economic and social issues, as factors on the degeneration of the human species. As degenerations, Kehl understood the deviations from the qualities of origin of individuals under the action of circumstantial factors such as poverty and addictions, and especially congenital and hereditary. According to the author,

degenerations did not always manifest with the presence of physical stigmata - as happened in individuals with mental retardation or imbecility - with “physically perfect or almost perfect individuals” who would, however, be considered psychic degenerates. Moreover, it must be considered that not every physical stigmata represents degeneration, as in the case of accidental physical defects. That is, an individual who loses an arm would not be a degenerate, and this condition would not be inherited to his descendants”(Kehl, 1929a: 41).

In this way, Kehl reaffirmed the importance of the environment in the formation of hereditary conditions. Therefore, change the transformation of this medium, change the mode of creation of hereditary characters more favorable to the regeneration of the species. In the case of alcoholism, for example, it seeks to show that alcoholics who generate degenerate descendants, when abstainers, can generate “more or less regenerated individuals.” The same could happen with syphilis, tuberculosis and all other physical and mental degenerations caused by external action. Therefore, the Brazilian eugenics sought to join the hygienic and sanitary education, seeking to transform the environment and acting directly on the phenomena of the population.

The process of regeneration of the species should take into consideration both genetic and hereditary issues, as well as education, habits, migratory processes, racial interbreeding, and other factors acting on individuals (Kehl, 1929b: 1). That is, eugenics, according to Kehl, should support individuals with “good” hereditary characteristics so that they could develop and propagate their species. While hygiene sought to interfere with the phenotypic conditions of the individual, via an improvement of external conditions, eugenics sought to improve the genotypic conditions, not only of individuals, but of the

whole community.

Sanitation and hygiene were part of what Kehl called “preventive eugenics,” which was intended to “combat factors hostile to man.” Therefore, in addition to the hygiene of the race, it would be necessary to combat the ills that punished the country by intervening prophylactically on the diseases. According to Kehl, it was of utmost necessity to act, above all, in Brazilian rural environments, where diseases, associated with poverty, misery and ignorance, painted the face of a truly degenerate Brazil. In this way, eugenics would play a patriotic role, too, because, as Kehl recalls, “unless we take care of the eugenization of these impoverished and ignorant people, we can expect nothing for the future of Brazilian nationality” (Kehl 1923: 40).

Thus, Brazilian eugenicist thinking had a strong relationship with hygienist thinking. Eugenics, practiced in countries such as England, Sweden, and Germany, sought to intervene directly in population phenomena in order to select and protect the best seeds, taking into account the supremacy of heredity and the fixity of its characters. In contrast, Brazilian eugenics focused on “racial hygiene”, campaigns to combat alcoholism and venereal diseases, educational campaigns on conscious motherhood, the “strengthening” of the race, the regeneration of the people and the spread of eugenic ideas. It intervened to anticipate disease, adjust the behaviors and future of generations in the name of human progress and evolution.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In short, although the main objective of Brazilian eugenics was the preservation of the “best” genetic and racial “stocks”, as well as the improvement of the hereditary characters of the Brazilian people, it presented distinct characteristics from those practiced in countries such as England, Germany, the

United States and Sweden. While in these countries there was a greater adherence to the Mendelian theory of hybridization processes, considering, therefore, the fixity of hereditary characteristics, in Brazil eugenics was guided especially by the idea of acquired characteristics, developed by Lamarck.

This theoretical affiliation guided, therefore, eugenic practices closely related to the idea of sanitation of private and public spaces and the Brazilian people. While adherents of the Mendelian strand of eugenics used mechanisms of exclusion and elimination of individuals considered harmful to the future of the human species, such as sterilization and eugenic abortion, in Brazil there was a greater concern with the environment, treated as one of the factors mainly responsible for the degeneration of the species.

In this sense, Brazilian eugenics cannot be understood as a scientific current that had a unity. It is not possible to say that Brazilian eugenicists had clear and well-delineated purposes, constituting themselves as a homogeneous group whose main objective was the genetic control of the population. Contrary to this, eugenics in Brazil had a more campaigner, pamphleteer and propagandist character, having as its main name and diffuser of the ideas of Galton in the country the psychiatrist Renato Kehl.

Thus, linked to hygiene and sanitation, the Brazilian eugenicist discourses and practices sought to reach the population as a whole, understanding that eugenizing would also be sanitizing. The main concern of doctors

and hygienists was the spread of eugenic knowledge and practices as a measure of defense and improvement of the human species. Amongst the most common subjects were related to the transmission and treatment of venereal diseases, the importance of the premarital health examination, the sexual education of children, adolescents and young people, the importance of conscious and planned motherhood and education physical, and mental.

There was a strong concern to keep the population under control. The studies published sought to pay attention to the supposed harmful effects to the species of breeding between different races. They also presented immigration to “improve” Brazilian racial “stocks”, especially through a process of “whitening” the people. The control of immigration was justified not only by the need to prevent contagious diseases, but especially by attracting individuals who could “improve” Brazilian races, decayed by the process of interbreeding of different races (miscigenation).

In general, Brazilian eugenics has been configured as a diffuse movement through the diffusion of innumerable ideas and concepts, so as to arouse the attention of the people, especially the Brazilian elite, to the importance of achieving eugenic control of the population. “Making live and letting die” are the principles of biopolitics that apply perfectly to the Brazilian eugenics developed in this context.

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