

Löscher, Monika: *"...der gesunden Vernunft nicht zuwider..."*. *Katholische Eugenik in Österreich vor 1938*. Innsbruck: StudienVerlag 2009. ISBN: 978-3-7065-4601-0; 304 S.

Rezensiert von: Darko Polšek, Philosophische Fakultät, Universität Zagreb

A couple of years ago, with a tongue-in-cheek, a friend of mine called me *dottore eugenico*. Why? Because I had studied eugenic history, and claimed that new reproductive technologies produce a new kind of eugenics, totally different from the „old types“. The morale of the anecdote will be clear soon.

Monika Löscher, working for the „Platform Eugenics“, an Austrian interdisciplinary program on eugenics, follows the history of eugenics in Austria and Germany, with a specific focus on eugenic reflections in Catholic milieu. The outcome of her studies is the present volume, a beautiful piece of cultural history between two wars. My interest in the book was further stirred by a sentence at front which claimed that a number „von Katholiken, die an aktuellen biopolitischen Debatten teilnahmen, (betonten) dass Katholizismus und Eugenik durchaus zusammengedacht werden konnten und kein Widerspruch sein mussten“ (p. 9). Indeed, if it could be proved that even official or unofficial Catholics shared their piece of burden for notorious eugenic practice during and before the war, would it not be the last nail in the coffin of present do-gooders of similar rank who express their strong opinions against IVF and other beneficial reproductive technologies? The contemporary relevance of the eugenic historic episode would be immediately present.

It turned out, that the case is not so simple, and apart from this PR statement, Löscher never raises the contemporary parallel again. With a good ground, one has to say. Because, at the end of reading we spontaneously ask: Is the notion „Catholic Eugenics“ justified at all? Well, yes, in a sense. It would be a great misnomer if the volume with the subtitle above has not provided evidence for it.

But it did so only to a certain extent, and only with certain conditions. First, as far as we can tell from the volume, Austrian

Catholics were never engaged in negative-eugenic practice (by sterilizing unfit, for instance). Secondly, they generally forbid even the idea of voluntary sterilization, not to speak of the involuntary one, especially not under the auspices of the state. The central piece of Löscher's discussion, and perhaps also of evidence for the idea of „catholic eugenics“, the Encyclica „*Casti cannubii*“ („On the Christian marriage“) of Pope Pius XI (1930), explicitly claims:

„Es finden sich nämlich solche, die in übertriebener Sorge um die „eugenischen“ Zwecke nicht nur heilsame Ratschläge zur Erzielung einer starken und gesunden Nachkommenschaft geben - was der gesunden Vernunft durchaus nicht zuwider ist - sondern dem „eugenischen“ Zwecke den Vorzug vor allen anderen ... geben. Sie möchten daher von Staats wegen alle von der Ehe ausschließen, von denen nach den Gesetzen und Mutmaßungen ihrer Wissenschaft infolge von Vererbung nur eine minderwertige Nachkommenschaft zu erwarten ist ... Ja, sie gehen so weit, solche von Gesetzes wegen, auch gegen ihren Willen, durch ärztlichen Eingriff jener natürlichen Fähigkeit berauben zu lassen, und zwar nicht als Körperstrafe für begangene Verbrechen ... sondern indem sie gegen alles Recht und alle Gerechtigkeit für die weltliche Obrigkeit eine Gewalt in Anspruch nehmen, die sie nie gehabt hat und rechtmäßigerweise überhaupt nicht haben kann. Sie vergessen zu Unrecht, dass die Familie höher steht als der Staat ... Es ist nicht recht, Menschen, die an sich zur Eingehung einer Ehe fähig sind, aber trotz gewissenhafter Sorge nur einer minderwertigen Nachkommenschaft das Leben geben können, schon deshalb einer schweren Schuld zu zeihen, falls sie in die Ehe treten, wenn ihnen auch oft die Ehe zu widerraten ist.“ (p. 71f.)

Is this a „eugenic motto“? Hardly. It should better be considered its opposite. But Löscher makes a lot out of a piece at the end of the first sentence in the quote above, which says: „was der gesunden Vernunft durchaus nicht zuwider ist“ (which is definitely not against common sense). This is the title of her book, and she repeats it several times in the text. Now, consider the sentence again. Is it really

against common sense to expect healthy and strong kids? Even if one adds that health and strength of kids should be a priority, (which nowadays does not sound right) does it justify any eugenic policy? Has the Pope, with this sentence justified „catholic eugenics“? Let us assume so. But then, we have stretched the scope of eugenics so far that even the most innocent expectations of today’s parents may count as eugenic. Löscher is well aware of it. “(E)ugenische Postulate konnten nicht dermaßen in das katholische Milieu eindringen wie in anderen politischen und ideologischen Lagern“ (p. 168), she writes, „die österreichischen Katholiken haben . . . einen ziemlich konsistenten und eher ablehnenden Standpunkt eingenommen“, and were supporters „einer Defensivhaltung gegenüber den meisten Forderungen der negativen Eugenik . . . eugenische Eheberatung wurde in ihren biologischen Anteilen kritisiert“ (p. 168).

So how does Löscher justify the notion? Her basic idea is that practicing and official Catholics, theologians, physicians and some notable „eugenic“ institutions like „St Lucas’ Guild“ „played along“ and went with the eugenic stream, and most importantly - transformed the already existing *Zeitgeist* of efficiency and race supremacy to promote their own kind of eugenics – which would in turn strengthen the moral of family, rejuvenate the Catholic values, and the Church as such. So, in spite of all the criticism of eugenics, which was primarily motivated by the Pope’s Encyclica, Catholics have accepted eugenic thinking (p. 168) by thinking about efficiency and norms, about working abilities, status and class, degeneration and „Entartung“, and as previously common scholars in humanities used to say – by sharing the discourse with others (even when they find themselves at the opposite side of ideological spectrum).

But that is not all. Eugenicians have generally one thing in common with all sorts of demographically concerned people: they wanted to promote „positive“ eugenics, which is to say – at least one part of their ideology went hand in hand with demographically concerned. And this concern for the benefit (for the strength – i.e. fertility rate) of the national stock is a constant even today. According to William Schnei-

der¹, this was the case in France after the First World War: eugenics transformed itself (or „went along“ with the populist mainstream) to become an all-national movement to promote fertility. The catholic variant of eugenics, according to Löscher, was a bit more specific, though, and a bit closer to eugenicists, since at least some ideologues claimed that both camps „predigten Sittlichkeit“, in the words of a catholic-eugenic ideologue Peter Schmitz. In such ideological similarities (if eugenics preached prudence at all) Löscher finds grounds for her idea of Catholic eugenics.

We should not conflate demographic movements with eugenics, though. For instance, Löscher discusses other Schmitz ideas: 1. Justified family allowances (p. 87); 2. Tax reductions for families; 3. Establishment of new settlements; and 4. Establishment of councils for pregnant women. Do we call these measures eugenic? It depends. But judging by the extent of the same measures today in democratic and civilized countries, such demographic publicity hardly qualifies to be called eugenic. For instance, what is the measure of organism quality? In eugenics, it is mostly better genes and their carriers. Do such state measures discriminate upon these qualities? Perhaps some states thought they did, but if such allowances were granted indiscriminately, such policy cannot be called eugenic.

It is even not important whether the actors call themselves eugenicists. Perhaps they did. Catholic eugenicists spoke about „vernünftige Eugenik“, about „Eugenik, die sich keiner sittlich verwerflichen Mittel bediene“, „Eugenik vom katholischen Standpunkt“ (p. 88), but if they thought about something completely different, for instance by promoting fertility of good Catholics – well, then, so be it. But be concerned about the conceptual overstretch.²

I have faced a similar scholarly difficulty

¹William Schneider, *The Eugenic Movement in France 1890-1940*, in: Mark P. Adams (Ed.), *The Wellborn Science. Eugenics in Germany, France, Brazil, and Russia*, New York 1990, pp. 69-109.

²For an extensive elaboration of conceptual difficulties about what should we call eugenics, see: Diane Paul, *The Politics of Heredity. Essays on Eugenics, Biomedicine, and the Nature-Nurture Debate*, Albany 1998.

while writing about eugenics in Croatia. My scholarly hope that I would easily dig out significant and abundant resources and gruesome facts about what my compatriots eugenically did in the past, proved to be unjustified. And just like Löscher, I decided the same: not finding such gruesome facts (even thoughts), I stretched the definition – and called Catholic gatherings for fertility promotion, balls and tours – eugenic.

But all this has nothing to do with the quality of the work provided. I cherish the author's perseverance, prudence and effort in digging out such facts, which do provide a good picture of an overall catholic ideology of the time. If they turn out not to be so easily turned against our present-day opponents, so be it. She has to worry, though, that one day, very soon, someone calls her dottoressa eugenica, just by virtue of the fact that she explored the phenomenon.

HistLit 2009-2-124 / Darko Polšek über Löscher, Monika: "*...der gesunden Vernunft nicht zuwider...*". *Katholische Eugenik in Österreich vor 1938*. Innsbruck 2009, in: H-Soz-Kult 19.05.2009.