INTRODUCTION: CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

The history of eugenics, long viewed through the prism of Nazi racial hygiene, has finally reached the level of conceptual maturity necessary for a comparative and multidisciplinary examination. Over the past decades, eugenics was seen as a biological theory of human improvement grounded almost exclusively in ideas of race and class. But eugenics was equally a social and cultural philosophy of identity predicated upon modern concepts of purification and rejuvenation of both the human body and the larger national community. It is only recently that scholars have begun to approach eugenics as a cluster of diverse biological, cultural and religious ideas and practices that interacted with a variety of social, cultural, political and national contexts.¹

Apart from a continuous focus on the British, American and German variants of a wider European eugenic discourse, current interests have expanded both geographically by covering countries as diverse as Brazil, Russia, Romania, Turkey and China, and thematically by unravelling the important connections between eugenics and population policies, as well as its relationship with a number of political ideologies, including nationalism, liberalism, social democracy, anarchism, communism and fascism.² Given this innovative conceptual framework, it is surprising to note that hardly any comparative research has been conducted into the relationship between modernism and eugenics. Existing works largely concentrate on how eugenic ideas permeated modernist literary culture (and particularly so in Britain³), leaving an important aspect of this relationship unexplored: the modernist engagement with eugenic theories of human improvement and eugenic visions of national perfection. It is this insufficiently explored aspect of the history of European eugenics that I am pursuing in this book.

The current affluence of scholarship on modernity, and the interdisciplinary convergence it generated, has not only furthered an

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increased awareness of diverse traditions of eugenic thought, both defunct and active, but also prompted scholars to carefully examine established currents of thought shaping these traditions. Drawing inspiration from this scholarship this book argues that eugenics should be understood not only as a scientific narrative of biological, social and cultural renewal, but also as the emblematic expression of programmatic modernism. That is, the form of modernism that “encourages the artist/intellectual to collaborate proactively with collective movements for radical change and projects for the transformation of social realities and political systems.” Roger Griffin applied this broad conceptual model to suggest an eclectic interpretation of fascism, seeing it as the main consequence of the European society’s yearning for a new beginning. Racial improvement was an intrinsic component of this generalised longing for new foundations, with eugenics as the most sophisticated attempt to improve individuals and societies through biological engineering. It is in this strict, minimal sense, I argue, that eugenics intersected political ideologies like communism and fascism. To put it differently, and by alluding to one of Walter Benjamin’s classical aphorisms, whereas communists politicised art and fascists aestheticised politics, eugenicists biologised identity.

To substantiate the claim that eugenics is both a cluster of scientific narratives and an expression of modernity, this book looks at debates and speculations on the nature of the relationship between modernist thought and eugenics in various European countries between 1870 and 1940. During this period, Europe went through profound territorial, social and national transformations, and experienced a wide range of political systems in rapid succession: from imperial to democratic, communist, authoritarian, and fascist. As a corollary of this seismic transformation of the European political landscape, eugenics became part of a larger biopolitical agenda that included social and racial hygiene, public health and family planning as well as racial research into social and ethnic minorities. In this context, eugenics was as diverse ideologically as it was spread geographically, both advocated and adhered to by professional and political elites across Europe irrespective of their political and intellectual affiliation.

In order to capture the versatile nature of eugenics, this study will draw upon two methodological clusters. The first of these clusters highlights the broadness of eugenic thought as, like most modern