CONCLUSION: TOWARDS AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF EUGENIC KNOWLEDGE

This book has focused on how eugenics emerged and interacted with European national cultures between 1870 and 1940. During this period, eugenics became part of larger social, political and national agendas that included social hygiene, population policies, public health and family planning, as well as racial research on social and ethnic minorities. As I have argued, eugenics widely served as a vehicle for transmitting a social and political message that transcended political differences and opposing ideological camps. Moreover, eugenics was as diverse ideologically as it was spread geographically, and adhered to by professional and political elites across Europe, from West to East, irrespective of their political and cultural contexts.

Three overarching conceptual strategies have guided this discussion of modernism and eugenics: first, the disentanglement of symbolic eugenic geographies, such as the division between Western and Eastern Europe, by looking at national eugenic traditions from a regional and cross-national perspective; second, the introduction of an asymmetric comparison to evaluate different national contexts which shared similar eugenic practices or, in other words, the search for conceptual and ideological meanings in the broader traditions and frameworks of thought in which eugenic texts were produced; and, finally, third, the formulation of a eugenic epistemology, namely that scientific knowledge is a social construct, moulded onto images of society and culture. I have discussed the first two strategies in the Introduction, and I want to briefly elaborate on the third now.

In his Thinking with History: Explorations in the Passage to Modernism, one of the most respected historians of Central European modernity, Carl E. Schorske advised new generations of historians to look at neighbouring disciplines for inspiration and encouragement. The history of science, he believed, was one of those disciplines as it “lent
itself most readily to a purely internalistic treatment on a progressive premise shared by both the natural scientists and the public.” Such academic intrusion is, by no means, unproblematic. As Schorske further noted, “[h]istorians who sought to embed scientific insight in a social matrix were resisted, in part justly, for their inadequate scientific understanding, but also because they tampered with the mythology of the autonomy of science and discovery prevailing in the scientific guild.”

Challenging this “mythology of the autonomy of science” is precisely what I have attempted in this volume. Eugenic knowledge was created by the social and intellectual contexts that informed it. Moreover, eugenicists – like other professionals – were frequently enveloped by their social and political existence, and often adhered to dominant social and political practices. Eugenicists were not separated from the culture they inhabited, and the questions they posed about the individual, society and the state, as well as the interpretations they extracted from their empirical data and experiments were shaped by cultural attitudes, social needs and political possibilities. I believe that in order to construct a convincing relationship between modernism and eugenics one must also expose the cultural, social, political and ideological factors that shaped the configuration of eugenic theories.

According to Peter J. Bowler, all scientific theories “have an ideological dimension that must be exposed if we are to understand why these particular ideas about nature were proposed.” Recently, such a perspective was forcefully enunciated by Gabrielle M. Spiegel in her reflections on the “Task of the Historian” presented to the annual meeting of the American Historical Association. “If we acknowledge,” Spiegel argued,

that history is the product of contemporary mental representations of the absent past that bear within them strong ideological and/or political imprints – and it seems unlikely that any historian would today disagree with this, whether framed in terms of discourse, social location, or some other form of the historian’s fashioning – then it seems logical to include within the determinants of historical practice the impress of individual psychological forces in the coding and decoding of those socially generated norms and discourses.

In attempting to decode various eugenic texts produced between 1870 and 1940 and their ideological ramifications, I came to realise that modernism and eugenics should not be artificially separated