Marius Turda, *În căutarea românului perfect: specific național, degenerare rasială și selecție socială în România modernă* [In search of the perfect Romanian: national specifics, racial degeneration and social selection in modern Romania], Iași, Polirom, 2024, 307 p.

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Professor Marius Turda's work is a new and intriguing history of how the national character was defined after the formation of the modern Romanian state, with the upper limit of investigation set at the year 1950. Shaping national identity gradually became more problematic, as the process of finding a proper specificity gradually turned into one of distinguishing oneself from the Other; it became easier to say what a Romanian was not, rather than what a Romanian truly was. Turda analyses this process of identity distinction from two perspectives: on the one hand, antisemitism and racism, involving the exclusion (physically and spiritually) of Jews, Roma, and other ethnic minorities from the "body of the nation;" on the other hand, through eugenics and the identification of dysgenic elements and factors contributing to both individual and national degeneration.

The peasant served as the leitmotif of all literary, philosophical, and cultural works concerning Romanian identity, so it also became central to scientific attempts to define the nation. Ultimately, culture and science gave rise to a form of scientism that sought to discover—and even improve—the Romanian. Doctors viewed things beyond the romanticized vision of rural life; the peasant needed to be civilized, and this process is described as "a true experiment of civilization, culture, and social selection, without which the Romanian state could not be conceived as national" (13). Beyond the individual

peasant, rural families were seen as the wellspring of physical and moral national regeneration. Plans were drawn up to protect the nation's biological capital, involving direct state intervention in the private sphere, a phenomenon known as biopolitics.

Divided into six chapters, the study addresses the issues thematically and chronologically, also considering international events that influenced the evolution of these ideas. Drawing upon his expertise in the history of European eugenics and medicine, Marius Turda offers a comparative perspective on the history of racism and eugenics, demonstrating that these phenomena were not merely pale imitations of their European counterparts. On the contrary, eugenics, racism, and antisemitism were part of a national "weltanschauung," with Romanian doctors, anthropologists, and philosophers engaging in the exchange of ideas with important foreign scholars.

The first chapter studies the ideas of Constantin Rădulescu-Motru, A.C. Cuza, and Aurel C. Popovici, highlighting the early problems brought by modernity in Romania, the emergence of anti-modernist, anti-urban attitudes, and increased antisemitism—especially as the Great Powers forced the Romanian state to regulate the "Jewish question." Early attempts to define national specificity are noted, drawing from Houston Stewart Chamberlain's ideas and raising the notion of the Jew-Romanian peasant conflict as a national security problem, particularly for A.C. Cuza, who considered antisemitism necessary for national defence.

Early forms of "biologizing the nation" are observed, with spiritual and physical rebirth becoming interdependent. Nationalist-anthropological views strove to regenerate the man / citizen, both spiritually and physically, while simultaneously defining the Romanian in biological, cultural, geographic, historical, and linguistic terms.

The next chapter explores the idea of racial degeneration and the rise of racial antisemitism in the second half of the 19th century, when anthropologists discussed the Jewish racial type. Degeneration was identified in two ways: either as a result of modernization or as caused by either racial mixing or mere interaction with other ethnicities. The classification of races arose against the backdrop of pre-existing representations of the Other—the non-European. Anthropometric measurements sought to demonstrate what was already "common knowledge": that the non-European was firstly different, and secondly inferior.

For doctors and eugenicists, "Greater Romania" had to be consolidated biologically, achievable only through strengthening the physical, psychological, and moral health of the peasantry. Gheorghe Banu was concerned with the sanitary measures needed in rural areas, proposing the concept of "village biology." Conversely, some doctors argued that degeneration was caused by racial mixing—Nicolae Roșu being one example. Analyses of psychiatric clinic records supported racial antisemitism: Ludwig Erich and Petru Tipărescu claimed that Jews were predisposed to mental illnesses because they were racially degenerate, while Romanians suffering from similar disorders were not degenerate but affected by their environment.

There were also moderate opinions on racism and antisemitism, but these became increasingly rare in the 1930s, and, by the 1940s, ethnic purification became a reality rather than just a topic of dispute.

The third chapter underlines how, in anthropology, anthropometric and cultural studies combined to define Romanian national (or racial) identity. Historiographical issues were sought to be resolved through craniology and serology, but these anthropometric measurements revealed another issue: there was no homogeneous Romanian racial type. Yet, because Romanian racism proved "flexible and adaptable" (102), the existence of various racial types in Romania became an opportunity to search for a racial archetype, for an ideal Romanian who once existed and whose traits could still be identified in the blood, albeit dispersed and thus requiring social and racial selection.

Petru Râmneanțu wrote the boldest works in sero-anthropology, showing that the Székelys and Csángós were actually Magyarized Romanians. For Râmneanțu, cultural, linguistic, or religious aspects were meaningless; only blood mattered for national belonging—probably the pinnacle of the ethnicist nation, while the voluntarist view of nationhood was not so much rejected, as rendered useless. Turda also highlights the politicization and nationalization of anthropology, comparing anthropological studies of Hungarians and Romanians: the same subject could have different scientific answers.

The study then focuses on methods discussed to halt degeneration—that is, forms of "negative" eugenics. Until the 1930s, the United States served as a model for such policies; after the Nazi laws of 1933, attention turned to Germany. For some, the German model was too radical, while for Iordache Făcăoaru, Ioan Manliu, or Eugen Relgis it could be extended to other social groups. However, for most, the German model was irreconcilable with the

dominant spirit of "Latin eugenics" in Romania. Doctors like Gheorghe K. Marinescu, Emilia Daneș, or Iosif Leonida emphasized environmental improvement. The Romanian delegation at the International Congress of the Penal and Penitentiary Commission in Berlin in 1935, led by Nicolae Iorgulescu, is also noteworthy for rejecting a resolution to sterilize criminals across all participant countries.

The fifth chapter reveals how the Roma were considered irreconcilable with Romanian identity, while "Romanianized" Roma—although seen as "civilized"—posed a dual threat of degeneration: racial and social. Antisemitic laws and the deportation of Roma were another way of defining the Romanian by eliminating what was not it, via, as Mihai Antonescu put it, ethnic purification. Sabin Manuilă was one such scholar entirely hostile to the Roma, while Liviu Stan provided a theological perspective to explain discriminatory measures.

The stigmatization of the Roma continued during the communist period, and the final chapter investigates the change in the eugenic discourse that accompanied the shift in political regime. The new model became the Soviet Union, but the aspirations remained the same: the search for the "new man." The Soviet example prompted calls for medicine and anthropology—long dominated by nationalist ideas—to serve the official ideology; true research was to be materialist-dialectical, marking a fresh chapter in both communism and eugenics, albeit in altered forms.

Ultimately, Turda demonstrates the influence of ideology and official politics even on science, showing that how scientific knowledge meets, at its edges, both speculation and popular culture. The search for national specificity oscillated between cultural studies and science: nationalist ideas served as groundwork for research, shaping both objectives and results, with research gaps later filled with sophistry. The work undoubtedly achieves its aim of highlighting "the role the concept of race played in the debate about national specificity in modern Romania" (22).