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CORRADO GINI AND THE SCIENTIFIC  
BASIS OF FASCIST RACISM

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SUMMARY

*It is controversial whether the development of Fascist racism was influenced by earlier Italian eugenic research. Before the First International Eugenics Congress held in London in 1912, Italian eugenics was not characterized by a clear program of scientific research. With the advent of Fascism, however, the equality “number = strength” became the foundation of its program. This idea, according to which the improvement of a nation relies on the amplitude of its population, was conceived by statistician Corrado Gini (1884-1965) already in 1912. Focusing on the problem of the degeneration of the Italian race, Gini had a tremendous influence on Benito Mussolini’s (1883-1945) political campaign, and shaped Italian social sciences for almost two decades. He was also a committed racist, as documented by a series of indisputable statements from the primary literature. All these findings place Gini in a linking position among early Italian eugenics, Fascism and official state racism.*

The current historiography of the Fascist regime has frequently focused on the sudden imposition by Benito Mussolini (1883-1945) in 1938 of the *Manifesto degli Scienziati Razzisti* (also known as the *Manifesto della Razza*), the document that gave official birth to Fascist racism as a state institution<sup>1</sup>. Many authors have underlined in a variety of ways the extraneous nature of the *Manifesto della*

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*Razza* to the previous Italian cultural tradition, in which an explicit, well-defined and institutionalized racist ideology was until that time substantially absent<sup>2</sup>. Within this framework, there is a diffused idea among contemporary scholars that the official introduction of Fascist racism was an artificial construct, which Mussolini was forced “to import from the outside” due to the necessity of agreeing with the model imposed by the German ally.<sup>3</sup> According to Renzo De Felice, Mussolini failed in his first attempt, in 1937, to introduce a specific anti-Semitic policy, and opted for a more general racist ideology, clearly detailed in the *Manifesto della Razza*, which implied an anti-Jewish policy as a particular case of the more general racist ideology<sup>4</sup>.

*Racism had the advantage of being more impersonal and totalitarian [than anti-Semitism], concerning the Jewish people in an indirect way, in a much larger context, of presenting itself in an apparently more scientific character<sup>5</sup>.*

Mussolini’s intention, however, was to incorporate Germany’s racism into the Fascist ideology, to properly readjust it so as to avoid the embarrassing circumstance of having Mediterranean people considered inferior racial types than German ones, and to find a substantial agreement with the Catholic Church, which opposed the cruel means intended by the Nazi hierarchies. From these modifications stemmed the idea of the Roman-italic race<sup>6</sup>, and the milder version of the Italians’ racist ideology when compared to the Nazis.<sup>7</sup> A different historical trend, on the other hand, has supported the idea that the *Manifesto della Razza* was not exactly extraneous to the previous Italian cultural tradition, and that some literary, political and religious actors had clearly instigated precise racist ideals from both the nationalistic and the Catholic frameworks<sup>8</sup>. This is the case of the Italian politician Giovanni Preziosi (1881-1945), the priest and Church historian Umberto Benigni (1862-1934) and the Jesuit

circle operating around the Catholic journal *Civiltà Cattolica*, authors, after the end of the Great War, of an aggressive anti-Semitic propaganda<sup>9</sup>. The same issue holds for those nationalistic groups and avant-garde artists which, since the beginning of the twentieth century, had imbued the Jewish culture with racist connotations instigated by various trends in the arts and literature<sup>10</sup>.

Yet, despite the variety of views and abundant studies on the sudden introduction of *Manifesto della Razza*, which was mostly considered a political phenomenon interconnected with literary, philosophical and religious issues, it has long been assumed, as underlined also by Maiocchi<sup>11</sup>, that the Italian scientific tradition did very little, or altogether nothing, to explicitly support or pave the way for the eventual introduction of official racial laws. Surprisingly, the study of a possible interaction between the Italian scientific tradition especially the one developed in the two decades before the introduction of the *Manifesto della Razza* and Fascist racism was not properly analyzed by the scholarly literature until the end of the 1990s<sup>12</sup>. The issue is currently the focus of fervid debates among Italian and international scholars<sup>13</sup> who, delving into the Italian eugenic framework before the rise of Mussolini in 1922, are trying to understand its unique and atypical traits when compared to the Anglo-Saxon matrix<sup>14</sup>. The case of the eugenic sciences, in particular thanks to their relevant connections to a variety of other fields of scientific expertise, such as the social, demographical, biological, statistical and political sciences has proven to be a well-suited perspective from which to approach significant aspects of the historical controversy outlined at the beginning of this introduction<sup>15</sup>. It was also through the eugenic sciences that Fascist politics found a way to proclaim what Emilio Gentile calls the “religious character” of the regime, which “propos[ed] not only to govern human beings but to regenerate them in order to create a new humanity. In this way, political revolution became total revolution, permeating all aspects

of human life and abolishing any distinction between the personal and the political”<sup>16</sup>. It should be clear, however, that Italian eugenics before the advent of Fascism was anything but “a homogeneous movement, coherent with itself”<sup>17</sup>; it was instead a “multiform archipelago” composed of many interconnected facets<sup>18</sup>. Likewise, the introduction of the *Manifesto della Razza* was the result of an extremely complex and articulated debate that, despite Mussolini’s centralized control, involved a heterogeneous group of scientific, political and religious actors. Within this framework, it is very difficult, if not impossible altogether, to draw any conclusive and absolute claim on the outlined problem when studying eugenics and state racism in their wholes, as two monolithic categories.

In this paper, I will argue that it is through the analyses of smaller parts of the problem, and by means of abundant comparative studies, that a deeper and more mature view can be developed: special “filters” should be adopted to isolate specific topics in both categories, and to check whether any form of logical continuity can be drawn between these topics in both eugenics and state racism. An example of such filters would be that of the demographic sciences a perspective from which to highlight the exclusively demographic aspects of the complex and multiform debates that characterized both the early eugenic tradition and the official introduction of state racism. From this perspective, we can analyze how a specific demographic issue or a specific contribution made by a certain actor developed within both categories, and whether any logical continuity can be drawn between these issues. In the following pages, I will focus, through the filter of the demographical sciences, on what I will argue to be a significant thread connecting early eugenics to Italian state racism. The focus will be on the figure of the Italian demographer, sociologist and statistician Corrado Gini (1884-1965) and on the way in which he approached the topic of degeneration the specific issue under investigation within both eugenic and Fascist

frameworks. Gini's early work was probably influenced by previous contributions made at the turn of the twentieth century by Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923) on the measurement of inequalities in income and wealth in different countries, ideas that Gini used to develop a precise theoretical framework for approaching the different birth rates characterizing various social groups. It will be shown that the basic ideas Gini had already developed before the advent of Mussolini remained, despite some subsequent refinements, basically the same throughout Gini's scientific career. In addition to this, Gini was both a leading actor in the early eugenic tradition and an influential protagonist of the Fascist regime; moreover, he was also a declared racist, as is indisputably documented in many of his works. All these findings place him in a special linking position between early Italian eugenics on one hand and Fascism and official state racism on the other, underlining what I will argue to be a significant connection between the Italian scientific tradition and the Fascist racial policy of 1938.

To set the argument within the proper framework, a short historical excursus must be undertaken. I will start by focusing on the way in which Francis Galton's (1822-1911) ideas on eugenics were received in Italy at the beginning of the twentieth century, and how they interacted with contributions made by Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) to the field of anthropological criminology after the publication of *L'Uomo Delinquente (Criminal Man)* in 1876. A better comprehension of the Galton-Lombroso interface, especially in connection to the idea of degeneration, highlights the considerable role played by Gini in influencing both early eugenic research and the ideological foundations of the Fascist regime. An analysis of the figure of Gini is thus an essential ingredient for approaching a study of the historiographical problem of to what extent Mussolini's racist policies were rooted in Italy's cultural and scientific traditions.

*A Short Historical Excursus*

In *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development* (1883), Francis Galton introduced for the first time the word “eugenics” into the social sciences<sup>19</sup>. He was looking for a

*brief word to express the science of improving stock, which is by no means confined to questions of judicious mating, but which, especially in the case of man, takes cognisance of all influences that tend in however remote a degree to give to the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable than they otherwise would have had<sup>20</sup>.*

Galton’s ideas about the improvement of the most “suitable races” were the result of a long process of reconstructing the genealogies of people who had made important contributions to the development of humankind. His idea was that intellectual capabilities are congenital and hereditarily transmitted, and are only partly influenced by education and by the social environment in which we live. In 1904, he wrote that eugenics is “the science which deals with all influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race; also with those that develop them to the utmost advantage<sup>21</sup>”. One year later, he proposed a new definition, saying that, “Eugenics may be defined as the science which deals with those social agencies that influence, mentally or physically, the racial qualities of future generations<sup>22</sup>”. It’s interesting to notice that the term “improve” disappears in the second definition, which seems to be broader in its scope, allowing for both a direct improvement of positive traits and also for the repression of the negative ones. Galton made a significant addition in 1908, when he stated that “The Science of Eugenics (pronounced with a soft g, as in the name of the Empress Eugénie and in the word Genesis) is based on Heredity<sup>23</sup>”. These three statements reveal the two cores of eugenics: the intention to improve the human race by means of artificially controlled agencies, and the entire enterprise’s foundation on the theory of heredity.

Connected to the notion of improving inborn qualities in a race was the problem of degeneration of genius: genius is fragile and sterile, and genial traits tend to regress towards the features of the average man if natural selection is not properly reinforced with an artificial eugenic selection<sup>24</sup>. According to Galton, there were two possible ways to prevent an overall quality decrease in the population. The first was through eliminating the unwanted individuals, and the other was through propagation of the preferred ones.

*Could not the undesirables be got rid of and the desirables multiplied? Evidently the methods used in animal breeding were quite inappropriate to human society, but were there no gentler ways of obtaining the same end, it might be more slowly, but almost as surely? The answer to these questions was a decided "Yes" and in this way I lighted on what is now known as Eugenics<sup>25</sup>.*

Two different social scenarios were then possible. In the first case a stop should be put to the "production of families of children likely to include degenerates", by adapting various techniques including castration, sterilization and abortion<sup>26</sup>. If unsuitable marriages were "banned socially, or even regarded with the unreasonable disfavor which some attach to cousin-marriages, very few would be made<sup>27</sup>". The second route was to influence the useful classes in the community toward contributing more than their proportion to the next generation<sup>28</sup>. It should be noted, however, that in Galton's original conception, this second possibility was valued much more than the first one, and he was very explicit in stating this idea: "The possibility of improving the race of a nation depends on the power of increasing the productivity of the best stock. This is far more important than that of repressing the productivity of the worst<sup>29</sup>". With these two ways of influencing the development of humankind, two different types of eugenics were slowly defined at the beginning of the twentieth century: on the one hand there was the so-called "positive eugenics", which was directly aimed at the improvement of the genetic stock of a popu-

lation by acting on the birth increase of the desirable elements, and on the other side was “negative eugenics”, which prohibited undesirable individuals from reproducing, which in many instances entailed the organic destruction of “lives not worth living”<sup>30</sup>. During the subsequent decades the latter method gained the upper hand.

At the end of the nineteenth century, none of Galton’s books had been translated into Italian. Even if Galton was known on the Italian peninsula, his influence was not particularly significant until 1912, the year of the First International Eugenics Congress in London. This congress represented a seminal moment for the history of Italian eugenic research: before that time, Italian eugenics was focused on debates surrounding the biological regeneration of the Italian nation but lacked a rigorous and well-defined program of scientific research<sup>31</sup>. After the meeting in London, however, eugenics went through a rigorous process of organization and institutionalization<sup>32</sup>, and the London Congress divided early Italian eugenics into two parts: a previous non-institutionalized fragment, and a new, institutionalized one. After 1912, ideas on eugenics started to circulate more widely on the Italian peninsula, becoming the focus of debates in conferences and in various journals dedicated to the topic<sup>33</sup>. Despite this development, however, Italy would potentially have been ready to receive and diffuse Galton’s ideas even before the London Congress, due to Lombroso’s previous contributions to the establishment of the theory of anthropological criminology. Lombroso’s concepts resonated strongly within Italian culture, and they were closely related to Galton’s perspective. Both authors, for example, focused on genius and degeneration, ideas which would be the starting point for Corrado Gini’s subsequent approach to connected issues.

On a winter day in 1870, Lombroso was conducting research on Italian criminals. Being at that time professor of psychiatry, nervous pathology, and anthropology at the University of Pavia<sup>34</sup>, he was analyzing the skull of a brigand condemned three times for robbery



and once for arson<sup>35</sup>. The name of this man was Giuseppe Villella (1803-1872), a peasant from Motta Santa Lucia (Catanzaro, Italy) who was imprisoned, and died, in Pavia. The anatomical analysis of Villella's cranium revealed an anomaly "on the occipital part, exactly on the spot where a spine is found in the normal skull<sup>36</sup>". This was a distinct depression that Lombroso named *median occipital fossa*

*because of its situation precisely in the middle of the occiput, as in inferior animals, especially rodents. This depression, as in the case of animals, was correlated to the hypertrophy of the vermis, known in birds as the middle cerebellum<sup>37</sup>.*

The observation of this anomaly in Villella's cranium was a revelation for Lombroso. "At the sight of that skull," he writes, "I seemed to see, all of a sudden, lighted up as a vast plain under a flaming sky, the problem of the nature of the criminal—an atavistic being who reproduces in his person the ferocious instincts of primitive humanity and the inferior animals<sup>38</sup>". According to Lombroso, criminality, madness and genius were all sides of the same condition: an expression of degeneration, a sort of regression in the history of evolution<sup>39</sup>. Degeneration affected criminals and mad people, who were considered "atavistic" types. These were individuals whose development had stopped at an early stage of human evolution, exemplifying the emergence of ancestral components in the present day. As Lombroso put it,

*The criminal is an atavistic being, a relic of a vanished race. This is by no means an uncommon occurrence in nature. Atavism, the reversion to a former state, is the first feeble indication of the reaction opposed by nature to the perturbing causes which seek to alter her delicate mechanism [...] hunger, syphilis, trauma, and, still more frequently, morbid conditions inherited from insane, criminal, or diseased progenitors, or the abuse of nerve poisons, such as alcohol, tobacco, or morphine, cause various alterations, of which criminality that is, a return to the characteristics peculiar to primitive savages is in reality the least serious, because it represents a less advanced stage than other forms of cerebral alteration<sup>40</sup>.*

Lombroso also supported the idea that genius is closely linked to degeneration: “Those who have never come into contact with mentally deranged persons”, he said, “may deem it absurd to mention genius and insanity in the same breath, and still more absurd to seek to demonstrate the existence of flashes of inspiration in insane persons”<sup>41</sup>. Lombroso observed that men of genius were often affected by myriad remarkable problems. In his view, nature had to balance a particular advanced faculty with the development of certain kinds of deviance, insanity or anti-social behaviors:

*The prevalence of insanity in men of genius explained innumerable contradictions and mad traits in their lives and works, the true meaning of which had hitherto escaped biographers, who either ignored them altogether or covered reams of paper with vain attempts to represent them as inspirations or, at any rate, reasonable actions. It also explained the origin of some of the extraordinary errors committed by great men; for example, the absurdly contradictory actions of Cola di Rienzi, who, after making himself master of Rome when the city was in a state of chaos, restoring peace and order, reorganising the army and conceiving the vast idea of a united Italy, ended his patriotic mission with a series of extravagances worthy of a madhouse<sup>42</sup>.*

Galton, too, stressed in the second edition of his *Hereditary Genius* (1882): “The relation between genius in its technical sense (whatever its precise definition may be) and insanity”, he says, “has been much insisted upon by Lombroso and others, whose views of the closeness of the connection between the two are so pronounced, that it would hardly be surprising if one of their more enthusiastic followers were to remark that So-and-So cannot be a genius, because he has never been mad nor is there a single lunatic in his family”<sup>43</sup>. Talking about genius and insanity, Galton also emphasized that “there is a large residuum of evidence which points to a painfully close relation between the two, and I must add that my own later observations have tended in the same direction<sup>44</sup>”. While Galton was particularly concerned about the deterioration of genius among the descendants

of an eminent family, for Lombroso degeneration was conceived as the emergence of atavistic characteristics in both criminals and geniuses. Whereas Galton employed his eugenics as a possible way to counteract the effects of degeneration, Lombroso attributed an irreversible reversion to a former ancestral state. By employing the idea of atavism, Lombroso was able to give an account of the degeneration of modern man and his reduction to ancestral components, explaining the emergence of the past in the present time by means of the figure of a deviated man and his social relations to categories denoting normality versus aberration<sup>45</sup>.

*Circulation of social classes and colonial policies: Gini's way to degeneration*

In 1912, Corrado Gini published a book "*I Fattori Demografici dell'Evoluzione delle Nazioni*" (*The Demographical Factors of the Evolution of Nations*) in which he attempted "to explain the growth and decay of nations by variations in birth rates of different elements in their population"<sup>46</sup>. Gini found the causes of such variations in "the degree of economic development reached in any given instances"<sup>47</sup>. His paper turned out to be a fundamental apparatus for re-evaluating the social role played by the lower classes and addressing, from a different perspective, the issue of social degeneration<sup>48</sup>. Gini observed that the upper class the one composed of the wealthiest members of society is characterized by a less pronounced birth rate when compared to the lower social classes, a finding that he had already tried to explain in 1908 in his book *Il Sesso dal Punto di Vista Statistico* (*Sex from the Statistical Point of View*):

*If the stimulus to procreation has lost its intensity, that is due above all, I believe, to the diffuse economic well-being, the decreased physical activity, the broadening and accentuating of that complex of characteristics that we call civilization, the final limit of which is a beatific state, in which every desire is sated and every effort suppressed<sup>49</sup>.*

In Gini's perspective, environmental stimuli do play an important role in influencing the development of sex: the lifestyle and physical activity of the working class "command in the organism, and through it, in the germinal cells, a lively reaction, which is obstructed on the other [the higher one], by the opposite conditions of health and tranquility"<sup>50</sup>. This idea, which Gini conceived as a general "biological law valid for all human societies"<sup>51</sup>, was supported by a variety of fields of scientific expertise according to which "the sexual functions are favored, in superior species, by a life of physical fatigue, and in inferior species manifest themselves in alternate generations, under the stimulus of unfavorable environmental conditions"<sup>52</sup>. The most obvious consequence of this finding was that the lower classes were eventually destined to prevail over the higher ones, and since the latter were considered the carriers of those positive cultural and social features on which a nation can rely to improve and regenerate itself, the circulation of social classes propagated new fears about a possible degeneration of Italian society<sup>53</sup>. According to this scheme, Gini believed that an effective social improvement depends on the composition of the lower classes, upon which he focused his attention and which he did not consider entirely consisting of polluting elements. From a large variety of historical data, he in fact observed that excellent individuals, fully capable of constituting future elite classes, have emerged from time to time out of the lower social classes. Genius and excellence are not exclusive features of the elite, but excellence can naturally ascend from the lower classes, which Gini conceived as capable of positively influencing social evolution and national perpetuation. This idea was based on what Gini considered to be the important role played by the cultural environment.

*In a bad environment, a selected race will worsen, in spite of the most active selection; in a good environment, a race improves, even if subjected to reverse selection. This phenomenon has been ascertained for plants, and seems to hold true for all organisms, and, in particular, for man<sup>54</sup>.*

In 1912, he also expressed the idea that it is improbable that a child born in the disadvantageous classes would always be more degenerate than a child belonging to the upper classes, assuming that the two were raised, from a hypothetical viewpoint, in the same cultural conditions:

*Until it is shown that the children of the lower classes if they were brought up from conception in the same surroundings as the children of the higher classes would turn out inferior to these, it is not proven that by stimulating the reproductiveness of the higher classes, one would improve the race more than by leaving their place to be occupied by the children of the working-class<sup>55</sup>.*

According to Gini, then, the imbalance in the birth rate between the higher and lower classes, the differential birth rate that he focused on, does not necessarily imply either social degeneration or an obstruction to the achievement of a social evolution. “The great mass of population”, he explains in another article,

*is composed by those people who we call the poor classes; from them, as if from an immense breeding ground, the elects originate, in relatively small numbers, either through personal merit or through force of circumstances<sup>56</sup>.*

In such a way, Gini ended up proposing a completely new approach to the idea of degeneration, one we find neither in Galton nor in Lombroso, a position that focuses the attention on the “average people”, those composing the majority of the population. Given the dimensions of the lower classes when compared to the much smaller social elite, the statistical sciences epitomized the right tool to approach class study and find new ways to improve the national population. In 1914, in his article “L’Uomo Medio” (“The Average Man”), Gini declared that:

*The average man, and the average soldier, and the average child, and the average newborn, as they respond to the needs of the systematic average, also respond to the facts [...] meaning, as all generalizations based on a statistical analysis can and must respond to the facts, that is, not in single cases, but in mass cases<sup>57</sup>.*

This was the starting point for a prolific set of statistical studies that were destined to constitute the scientific foundation of the subsequent pronatalist population policy initiated by the Fascist regime. Analyses of the causal relationships among the physical and intellectual capabilities of the offspring and the mother's age, the month and the natural environment in which the conception had taken place, the time period of the breeding, and the temporal distances between subsequent births, were all examples of statistical investigations carried on by Gini in his eugenic enterprise<sup>58</sup>.

In addition to this, Gini also called attention to what he considered to be the real degeneration of the upper classes. While for Lombroso, geniuses were degenerate and atavistic, for Gini "the elite were not degenerate in themselves, but in the fact that their germ plasm was more evolved, and therefore would be the first to decay"<sup>59</sup>. Therefore, it seemed to him easier to obtain concrete results by working on the improvement of the lower classes, for the reason that

*artificially to stimulate the reproduction of the higher classes, and check that of the lower ones would be equivalent to trying to improve society by increasing the duration of the life of the old, and preventing new generations from taking their place<sup>60</sup>.*

The real risk of degeneration was, for Gini, due to excess emigration which Italian society was then suffering<sup>61</sup>, a process that, by reducing the lower classes composed of poorer people in search of job opportunities abroad, would have eliminated from the national pool the "least differentiated"<sup>62</sup> and "most reproductive"<sup>63</sup> elements of the nation, producing in so doing "a demographic and military senescence at first, then economic senescence, from which it will be extremely difficult to re-emerge"<sup>64</sup>.

It was indeed by means of the idea of national senescence that Gini generalized and extended his theory to the study of more general competition among nations. Already in 1912, he had showed that every na-

tion can be characterized by a specific age, allowing one to distinguish among young, mature and senescent nations according to their respective birth rates. "It is a common custom to speak of young populations and of old populations; and we feel that in such a phrase there is more than a simple metaphor"<sup>65</sup>. Young populations are characterized by a high tendency to proliferate, and by a pronounced necessity to expand in the attempt to find, mainly by means of wars and emigrations, a new position among the older nations, those marked by a less pronounced tendency to proliferate and characterized by an inevitable economic, political and military decline. In any event, the idea of degeneration was now extended to the notion of an entire nation. According to Gini, a high birth rate is the first symptom of a nation's well-being, and it is the interest of the government to contravene any decrease in the nation's proliferation capabilities:<sup>66</sup> "Nations produce, at the beginning of their civilization, stronger, more intelligent, and happier children; but these advantages are slowly lost with the progress of the nation"<sup>67</sup>. Embracing a kind of a Darwinian approach to the survival of the fittest, Gini claimed that younger nations do have the natural right to expand over the older ones, and that the latter are responsible for the development of wars because of their natural tendency to disallow the expansion of the younger ones.

After the end of the First World War, anxieties over a presumed quality decrease in the population started to circulate with an alarming tone. The Great War represented a dreadful example of counter-selection: while eliminating the youngest and strongest elements of a nation those people who were directly involved in the world conflict war produced a multitude of wounded, exhausted, underfed, battered and ill persons<sup>68</sup>. During the Great War, University of Cagliari statistician Franco Savorgnan (1879-1963) wrote:

*The great majority [of war survivors] will be, without doubt, undermined by privations, venereal diseases and tuberculosis, or, in the best hypotheses will have brought home from the war a nervous system strongly prejudiced*

*by the ceaseless fire of the artillery. [...] The dysgenic consequences of the war will have distant repercussions, which will weigh as a curse on the children of our children*<sup>69</sup>.

The genetic heritage of the white populations involved in the conflict was conceived as being endangered, and Italian eugenics began to focus nervously on various issues of national health and regeneration, going through a pronounced institutionalization process. The *Società Italiana di Genetica e Eugenetica* (Italian Society for Genetics and Eugenics) was created in 1919 by Gini, Cesare Artom (1879-1934), and Ernesto Pestalozza (1860-1934), while the *Società Italiana per lo Studio delle Questioni Sessuali* (Italian Society for the Study of Sexual Questions) was initiated in 1921 thanks to the help of Aldo Mieli (1879-1950), and finally the *Istituto di Previdenza e Assistenza Sociale* (Institute for Public Welfare and Assistance) was created in 1922<sup>70</sup>.

It should be clear, however, that the issue of national regeneration was not a new phenomenon at all. As Emilio Gentile writes, “the myth of national regeneration occupies a central place in Italian political and cultural history, from the Risorgimento to fascism”<sup>71</sup>. In addition to this, “the myth of national regeneration did not belong solely to nationalistic culture. It was also present, in various forms, in other political movements: in liberalism, democracy and socialism”<sup>72</sup>. During the years that followed the First World War, though, ideas about national regeneration underwent a massive institutionalization and were considerably affected and shaped by a heterogeneous group of scientific, political, and religious actors.

Already known as a leading scientist in the Italian eugenic community, Gini quickly assumed important positions inside the just established Fascist regime: his ideas were indeed particularly close to what the regime would eventually impose as its main lines of eugenic research. University professor at the universities of



Cagliari (1910-1913), Padova (1913-1923) and Rome (from 1923 to his retirement)<sup>73</sup>, Gini was among the intellectuals who, in 1925, signed the *Manifesto degli Intellettuali Fascisti*<sup>74</sup>, the official document that established the ideological foundations of Fascism. In 1926, he became president of the Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (Central Statistical Institute, the so-called ISTAT), and founded and directed the academic journals *Metron* (from 1920 to his death), *La vita Economica Italiana* (1926-1943), and *Genus* (from 1934 to his death) the official journal of the Italian Committee for the Study of Population Problems. *Metron*, in particular, gave Gini a considerable international reputation, especially after 1921, the year in which Sir Ronald A. Fisher (1890-1962) published in the journal his “On the Probable Error of a Coefficient of Correlation Deduced from a Small Sample”<sup>75</sup>. Gini was also the author of *The Scientific Basis of Fascism* (1927)<sup>76</sup> and, in the years that followed, he became so close to Mussolini that the two of them would meet for consultations twice a month<sup>77</sup>.

In 1929, the power of the ISTAT was strengthened by law, when it was “assigned the official task to designate a national representative in international scientific meetings on statistical subjects: Gini’s scientific and academic authority was thus enhanced by the law”<sup>78</sup>. This was the time when the ISTAT expanded in order “to fulfil the task of the agriculture and population census; the Institute also took part in the Rome Population Congress organized by Gini himself”<sup>79</sup>. This gave Gini even more international visibility and, in the dramatic years leading up to the Second World War, he was awarded numerous Italian and international honors including honorary degrees from the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan (1932), the University of Geneva (1934), and Harvard University (1936), in addition to his appointment to the presidency of the International Sociological Institute in 1933 and his election as an honorary member of the International Statistical Institute in 1939.

By 1927, the massive statistical and demographic analyses conducted by Gini and other ISTAT statisticians constituted the scientific ground from which stemmed a robust pronatalist policy that gave rise to a new, centralized and standardized arrangement in Italian eugenic research. Summarized in the equality “number = strength”, the new orientation imposed by Mussolini was based on the assumption that the power and improvement of a nation is strictly connected to the abundance of its population a fact that marked a turning point from a qualitative to a quantitative character in Italian eugenics<sup>80</sup>. Despite its almost exclusively political character, however, the pronatalist policy tacitly implied an alliance between the Fascist regime, who inaugurated it with Mussolini’s famous Ascension Day Speech in May 1927, and the Catholic Church’s sexual morals, reaffirmed in 1930 with the encyclical *Casti Connubii*<sup>81</sup>. It was indeed in the interest of both parties to promote a strong increase in the national birth rate: the former would have relied on a bigger army and would have created a younger nation, the latter would have relied on a larger catholic community. “Strength in numbers”, stressed Mussolini when talking about the necessity of increasing the Italian population in order to obtain a more powerful and strong nation<sup>82</sup>. “The most effective method to re-raise the birth rate, or to contain the decrease”, wrote Gini in 1928,

*is not to encourage the reproduction of small families and individuals who shun marriages, but rather that of those who have managed to remove every obstacle from their families that opposed their expansion and multiplication, who have preserved the generative power of earlier times, intact. Keeping these families in the country by putting the brakes on emigration, facilitating their natural tendency to reproduce by appealing to the sentiments and considerations that could entice them, executing, whenever necessary, their transplantation to regions that have strong needs for prolific elements, constitute the most effective measure*<sup>83</sup>.

There was no constraint on newborns and any form of birth control was banned, something that the more canonical eugenicists would

have considered absolutely crucial to guarantee healthy social development. “If a social class or a nation would take this initiative [that of birth control],” Gini stressed, “as a result it would become weaker than the other social classes or the other nations”<sup>84</sup>. The same idea appears even more effectively rewritten a few years later:

*When rationalistic practices take strong hold in a country, and the birth rate continues, for a certain period, to diminish, it is very difficult to arrest this descent. Individuals may subsist, but the nation, the race, is condemned: it will disappear, or at least lose its proper space in the world, to the benefit of those nations that, obeying instinct, still have the necessary vitality to maintain themselves and multiply*<sup>85</sup>.

It was not however just a matter of quantity: as Gini’s statistical analyses demonstrated, the middle class was capable of contributing to a possible improvement of Italian society and it was therefore in the interest of the regime to maximize the Italian population so as to increase the probability of producing excellence and enhancing the overall national quality. As Gini would eventually declare on the occasion of the Third International Congress of Eugenics held in New York in 1932, quantity and quality were strictly connected to each other in a way which made populations resemble a sort of biological organism:

*The interest taken by eugenicists of many countries in the recent International Population Congress of Rome, and the official participation at this New York Congress of the Italian Committee for the study of Population Problems, afford, I believe, a further recognition of the truth that in the matter of population, as in other fields, the problems of quantity and quality are indissolubly connected. As I see it, they are indissolubly connected not only because in practice it is difficult to think of a measure affecting the number of inhabitants which does not also affect their qualitative distribution, or of a measure hindering or encouraging the reproduction of certain categories of people which does not also modify, directly or indirectly, the number of the population; but also, and above all, because population is a biological whole, subject, as such, to biological laws which show us that mass,*

*structure, metabolism, psychic phenomena, the reproduction of organic life are all indissolubly connected, both in their static conditions and in their evolution, so that it would be vain to try to modify some of these characters without taking into account the stage of development attained by the others*<sup>86</sup>.

The Fascist's massive pronatalist population policy was nevertheless beset by a series of remarkable problems, opening Gini up to a series of attacks. First and foremost, it was supposed that the more a society grows, the less rich, on average, the population will have turned out to be. According to the Ginian school, however, populations develop first through a quantitative expansion, and then through a qualitative one, and per-capita richness would have been a later issue, to optimize in a subsequent stage<sup>87</sup>. In any event, the idea of a less rich population was seen by Gini as a positive trait, inasmuch as it is with material difficulties that a nation can temper its strength and character<sup>88</sup>. In the same way, unemployment was conceived as a problematic aspect of a growing society. On the other hand, Gini thought that there was no causal connection between the increase of population and an increase in unemployment: in 1928, with the publication of "Disoccupazione e Sovrappopolazione" ("Unemployment and Overpopulation"), he showed that the real value of a salary is not dependent solely on the economic laws of supply and demand, but depends on the fact that, due to the actions of trade-unions, salaries exhibit a dangerous "inertia"<sup>89</sup> which threatens their quick adjustment to the increasing needs of industry, creating a series of remarkable problems connected to employment. Last but not least was the problem of the primary resources needed to satisfy the demanding necessities of a growing society, shortages deemed solvable by means of an adequate colonial policy:

*Colonization has to be conceived as a part of that natural mechanism of regulation by means of which nature helps civilization to be transmitted from those populations which are at the top of their development to those which are more backward*<sup>90</sup>.

Although the Italian situation was considered adequate from the point of view of its birth rate, the cases of France and England looked much more problematic, allowing for their respective consideration as older nations. The French case was considered particularly dramatic, as a declining birth rate that lasted since the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century proved a significant factor in the loss of French prestige and power in comparison to the British neighbor<sup>91</sup>. From this perspective, Italy, being younger than these countries, was justified, in Gini's consideration, to prevail over them in its colonial expansion. The real problem was that of justifying Italian colonization of Ethiopia when, at least from the point of view of the age of the nation itself, Ethiopia was anything but older than Italy. Did Italy have any right to prevail over this country? Within this context, and supported by the scientific basis provided by his theory of national senescence, racist considerations started to become important to Gini's outlook. Making similar assertions to those of Italian anthropologist and explorer Lidio Cipriani (1892-1962), Gini said, "negroes do not give the confidence to be able to ever civilize themselves in the same way we do, and therefore they will never understand how much there is to do to exploit the immense natural resources of their land to the advantage of the entire humankind. Given such a condition, it is not fair that such natural resources remains unutilized, and civilized nations have the right to take possession of Africa just only for such resources"<sup>92</sup>. Similarly, ideas about the superiority of the Italian race started to be scientifically and politically employed in Gini's reasoning. Making use of his theory of the cyclical rise and fall of populations, he supported the idea that superior races would always have the right to prevail over inferior ones in the case of nations having the same demographical age, as indeed the case of Ethiopia.

*Until there will be in this world populations that develop in terms of numbers, culture, military strength, economic power, political prestige, and populations that decline, or populations that develop more or less quickly, or populations that decline more or less quickly, periodical territorial*

*redistributions will be inevitable. A perpetual status quo is an absurd idea. [...] There are only two possible solutions: either the populations that decline or those that develop more slowly adequately and opportunely make concessions to those populations that develop more quickly; or, on the other hand, the latter try and on the average they normally succeed to find their way by themselves*<sup>93</sup>.

These considerations were not extraneous to Gini's work, even early in his career, as clear traces of them can be found in many of his representative speeches and written works. In 1911 Gini had already presented his opinions about the inferiority of the Slavic race in a meeting of the Minerva Society a prestigious literary institution founded in Trieste in 1810 to promote the study of Italian history and the culture of the city. Speaking of the Italians, Gini wondered why "a race rich in intelligence, wealthy, nourished on noble traditions, animated by high ideals" should not prevail over "another race [the Slavic one], intellectually more limited, economically poorer, from whom the glories of the past cannot be a prod for glories in the future"<sup>94</sup>. Being one of the very first examples of Gini's racist positions, these words could be interpreted as a nationalistic attempt to reassure the irredentist people of Trieste, who feared the "negative influence" of their Slavic neighbors. But we can also find hints of a more general ideology, not limited to debates about the irredentist nature of north-eastern Italy. In 1914, in *L'Uomo Medio*, Gini explicitly admitted his convictions about the superiority of whole European civilizations when compared to other populations and cultures scattered around the globe: "The fact that all the populations who have come into contact with European civilizations", he says, "have, sooner or later completely abandoned their national costume, to adopt our monotonous clothing, is further proof of the influence that the imitation of a superior race exercises on the formation of the aesthetic ideals"<sup>95</sup>. He also expressed disgust for what he considered to be other "lower races", as he outlined in the same publication: "What is there more repugnant to us than the long

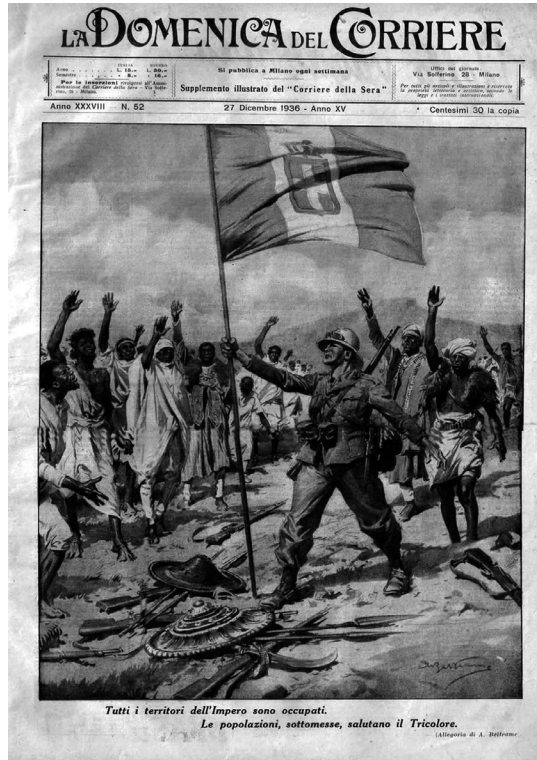


Fig. 1. Subdued African people greet Italian soldiers, in *La Domenica del Corriere*, December 27, 1936.

pug nose of the Negroes or the Australians, and more distant from the long straight nose of the Anglo-Saxons?" he asked. "Therefore", he continued, "when the English disembarked in Australia, the indigenous there derided them for their sparrow-hawk noses. And what is uglier than their swollen lips<sup>96</sup>? Even Asian populations were the object of his attention, as he stated, "What is said can be repeated for the eyes: eyes which to us seem swine-like appear wonderful to oriental populations, and their natural length industriously lengthened still more with paint is disgusting for us"<sup>97</sup>.

In 1919, in a letter to Leonard Darwin (1850-1943), Gini furthermore exemplified some of the most worrisome issues connected to interracial marriage, which, at that time, were the focus of fervid debates:

*At the victorious end of the world war, the allied powers find themselves in increased contact with the African world. It would therefore be opportune if the various eugenic societies aimed to gain legislative orders from the governments of the various nations, where such laws do not already exist, banning marriages between Europeans and the African races, allowing only those with Mediterraneans (Berbers, Egyptians) and with non-colored Arabs. Such bans must be extended to marriages with all those population groups of mixed blood scattered throughout the African continent. The scope of the proposal is to impede the growth of a European-African mixed-blood race, which, from various points of view, is undesirable<sup>98</sup>.*

The same racist positions persisted in Gini's career over the long term and, in Chicago in 1929, he explained why the interracial marriage between "whites" and "negroes" was particularly undesirable: mulattos did not present any of those "manifestations of greater strength, precocity or vital resistance which characterize many hybrids in the animal and vegetable kingdoms, and also [...] certain human hybrids<sup>99</sup>". Yet, they "present a higher percentage than Negroes of individuals who are unsuccessful at intelligence tests"<sup>100</sup>, while at the same time "they do not present an equal or higher frequency than do the Whites of particularly gifted individuals"<sup>101</sup>.

*It cannot be denied that mulattoes are generally intermediate between the Whites and the Negroes, consequently superior on the whole to the latter and inferior as regards most of the traits in which the Whites are superior; superior to the former and inferior to the latter in those few characters in which Negroes excel<sup>102</sup>.*

Despite his harsh position about the possibility for certain races to interbreed, Gini supported the idea that all races derive their origin from crossbreeding<sup>103</sup>. He believed that, in certain cases the interracial

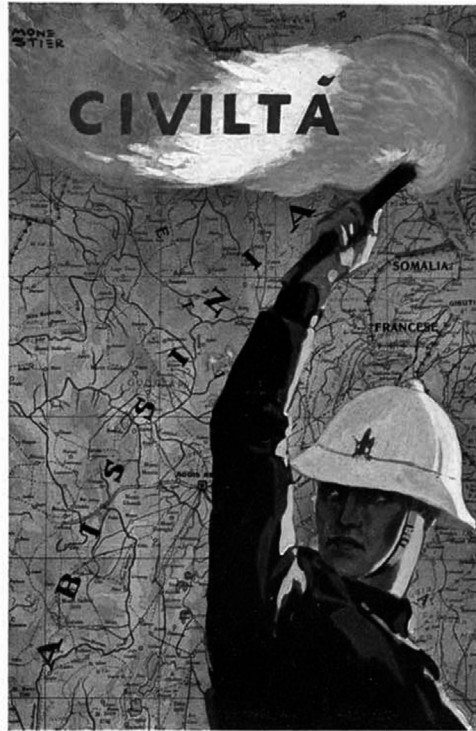


cial marriage of certain “allowed races” racial crosses can determine the rise of “populations endowed with superior characteristics”<sup>104</sup>. This was indeed the case of some people of the Italian Renaissance, descendants of the mixtures between the “Mediterranean dolichocephalic and the Alpine brachycephalic races”<sup>105</sup>. The problem of interracial breeding involved complex debates in Fascist Italy<sup>106</sup>; what is important to note here is that racism was not extraneous and politically detached from the earlier or more recent Italian eugenic traditions before the 1938 publication of the *Manifesto della Razza*, and that it is thus problematic to consider racist ideals as artificial constructs exclusively imported from the outside.

### *Conclusion*

The historiographical problem outlined in the introduction to this paper concerns a possible relationship existing between early Italian eugenics and the formal introduction of state racism with the publication of the *Manifesto della Razza*. Given the complexity of the topic, I decided to delve into a smaller part of the problem by using an imaginary filter to focus on exclusively demographical matters, and to isolate a set of selected contributions made to the Italian social sciences by Corrado Gini, a key figure of both the Italian eugenic tradition and the Fascist regime. These contributions to the idea of the differential birth rate and the theory of the competition among nations turned out to be particularly well-suited to shedding light on important aspects of my argument.

In the previous sections, I started off introducing the way in which the concept of degeneration was conceived by Galton and Lombroso before the institutionalization process that the Italian eugenic research went through after the London Congress in 1912. A study of the Galton-Lombroso interface highlighted the way in which the concept of degeneration had been substantially re-formulated by Gini during his scientific career; he not only shifted the attention to the



*Lo Scopo*

Fig. 2. Manifesto di Propaganda Fascista, circa 1934.

quotidian people who made up the vast majority of the population—the lower and middle classes—but, through the ideas of senescence and differential birth rate, he extended the idea of degeneration to an entire nation and showed how it had to be scientifically conceived to help the Italian country find a new, stronger place amongst competition with other nations. Gini's ideas were greatly and enthusiastically accepted by the Fascist regime, which was looking for a scientific justification to support its pronatalist population policy and colonial programs. Gini, in fact, eventually used the idea of national

senescence to justify both the Italian colonial policy in prevailing over the older nations of France and England, and to set up a precise racist hierarchy to justify the right of the superior Italian race to take possession of the African countries.

It should be clear, however, that Gini's scientific achievements are not limited to the examples reported and analyzed in this paper, the objective of which was not that of writing a cultural biography of this figure. An analysis of the contributions Gini made to the social sciences at large would make clear the wide range of activities and institutional appointments Gini was involved in and the impressive network of people he was connected to and debated with; in other words, the idea of a demographical filter was just a tool for keeping myself focused on a few relevant ideas, and not get lost in the myriad connections to other fields of scientific, political and religious expertise and related debates. The kind of evidence an analysis of the primary sources has provided seems to be relevant enough to continue a series of historical investigations into Gini's scientific enterprise as a whole and its connections to other figures who took part in the eugenic and Fascist debates.

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*Corrado Gini and the Scientific Basis of Fascist Racism*

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