“Citizens Useful to Their Country and to Humanity”: The Convergence of Eugenics and Pro-Natalism in Interwar French Politics, 1918-1940

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Abstract. Interwar France witnessed a convergence of two ostensibly diametrically opposed phenomena: eugenics and pro-natalism. In the 1930s in particular, pro-natalists, desiring to raise the French birthrate, and eugenicists, pursuing racial hygiene, came together both literally and discursively, allowing them to exercise a high degree of influence on politics and policy. In this manner, although France did not conduct a campaign of sterilization as did many other countries, eugenics influenced the formation of the French welfare state nonetheless, suggesting that historians should reassess their interpretation of its origins.

Keywords. eugenics, pro-natalism, France, politics

Résumé. C’est durant l’entre-deux guerre en France qu’est apparue la convergence de deux doctrines apparemment diamétralement opposées: l’eugénisme et le natalisme. Dans les années 1930, en particulier, les natalistes désireux d’augmenter le taux de natalité des Français et les eugénistes à la poursuite d’une hygiène raciale se sont réunis à la fois littéralement et discursivement, afin d’exercer une forte influence sur les politiques de l’État. Bien que la France n’ait pas mené une campagne de stérilisation comme l’a fait de nombreux autres pays, cet article suggère que les historiens devraient réévaluer leur interprétation sur les origines de l’eugénisme et son influence sur la formation de l’État providence en France.

Mots-clés. eugénisme, natalisme, France, politiques

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INTRODUCTION

The spring of 1936 was a turning point in French political history. The general elections of May produced a victory for the Popular Front—a coalition of the Communists, Socialists, and left-of-centre Radicals (akin in many respects to liberals, although with traditions of state interventionism and militant secularism)—formed to present a united opposition to the threat of fascism. The Popular Front’s triumph signaled four important firsts in French history: the Socialists would participate in government; a Socialist would be premier; that premier would be Jewish; and the new government would appoint three women to be undersecretaries of state.1

Given these auspicious beginnings, leftist commentators heralded the Popular Front in celebratory terms. Socialist Party Secretary-General Paul Faure, for example, greeted the election results with the words, “Reaction and fascism are erased,”2 while the Radical newspaper L’Ère nouvelle declared that “the hour of responsibilities has come.”3 While Blum’s government would collapse in just over a year, its achievements were nonetheless considerable and greeted with applause on the left. Historians too have generally been kind to the Popular Front, crediting it, in particular, with laying the foundations for the French welfare state.4 In short, the Popular Front is the interwar lynchpin in a Whiggish narrative of French history that portrays the French state as marching progressively towards a form of social democracy.

Yet, while the Popular Front represented progress for many, it left others behind. Laura Frader demonstrates, for example, that while the fabled Matignon Accords of June 1936 extended workers’ rights, neither women nor foreign workers shared equally in their benefits. Indeed, Frader argues that during and after the Popular Front, pro-natalism, with roots firmly on the right, dominated the formation of most social policy and that, by extension, the progressive origins of the welfare state have been overstated.5

In addition to this reservation, historians should consider another. The need to do so is suggested by the words of Henri Sellier, the Popular Front’s minister for public health. Critiquing the newly enacted “Family Code” of Edouard Daladier’s government in 1940, Sellier proclaimed:

In order to ensure the salvation of the everlastingness of the race, it does not suffice to [encourage] with the help of allowances the procreation of any kind of children, even defectives, but to apply to the human species the same precautions that one takes for the selection of domesticated animals and plants.

We must, above all else, [encourage] citizens useful to their country and to humanity.6
Although he may or may not have been a member of the French Eugenics Society, founded in 1912-13, Sellier’s ideas were clearly deeply influenced by eugenicism. As he declared in 1936, “I am for a politics of eugenics.” Sellier’s presence in such a prominent position in the Popular Front government indicates the importance of eugenic thinking in Blum’s cabinet and in the origins of the welfare state. The fact that his ideas were widely shared within the Popular Front and beyond only reinforces this impression.

The eugenics movement was broadly influential in the western world. The term “eugenics” was coined by Englishman Francis Galton in 1883 but proto-eugenicism had existed in France and elsewhere since at least the early 19th century, and theories of hereditary racial determinism had proven to have purchase amongst French anthropologists, ethnographers, pediatricians, obstetricians, puerculturalists, gynecologists, venerologists, and social hygienists. Galton’s definition of eugenics was “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,” while the French Eugenics Society’s statutes defined it more simply as “the science of the conservation and the improvement of the race.” What eugenicists meant by race was not always clear. Some focused on the health of the species broadly while others seemed concerned with their particular race, which in France might mean either the “French” race or commonly the white European one. In sum, eugenicists were those who believed in the existence of biologically defined human races of one kind or another and held that those races could (and desired that they should) be improved through interventions ranging from selective breeding to improved social conditions to sterilization and euthanasia. Not all eugenicists, notably, embraced the entire range of measures; in particular, many shied from the “negative eugenics” of sterilization and euthanasia. A diverse group, eugenicists can also sometimes be hard for historians to identify. In their studies of French eugenics, Anne Carol and William Schneider focus largely on those who self-identified as eugenicists, usually through their membership in the Society; herein the label shall also be attached to those whose words or deeds revealed them to fit the above definition.

Curiously, despite the presence of Sellier and other eugenicists at the centre of French power, while historians have examined the German eugenics movement at some length, been attentive to the effect of eugenic thinking in the United States, Canada, and Scandinavia, emphasized the pernicious influence of British eugenicists such as Galton, and paid close attention to the spread of eugenics among French doctors and academics, the impact of eugenist thinking on French policy has been underemphasized. Accordingly, the mounting evidence that eugenics was a powerful force in France has not prompted
the rethinking of the meta-narrative that one would expect. Timothy Smith’s recent book on the origins of the French welfare state, for example, devotes no attention to the influence of eugenics.18

Yet, an examination of interwar French political discourse, from the far-right to the far-left, reveals that eugenics had a strong and growing influence on French politicians’ thinking. Indeed, the 1930s witnessed a convergence between right and left, which resulted from a uniquely French intersection of two traditions. Originating on the centre-right, the powerful pro-natalist movement, gravely concerned with France’s moribund birthrate, reached the apex of its influence on both the right and left just at the moment when it was most tinged with biological determinism.19 On the left, an influential minority of eugenicists like Sellier, emerging in part from the neo-Malthusian tradition, became similarly convinced of the need for France to promote both racial hygiene and fecundity—both “quality and quantity” in Schneider’s words—and allied itself with the pro-natalist camp.20 This helped prompt a startling about-face: while in the 1920s the French socialist left—the Socialists and the Communists—was resolutely hostile to pro-natalism, by the mid-1930s it embraced it. Thus, the Popular Front, progenitor in many respects of the welfare state, also symbolized the coming together of right and left over an agenda to promote the health and fruitfulness of the so-called French race.21 Accordingly, while France had no program of mass sterilization as did many other western states in the period, a eugenicist mentality lay at the heart of French politics and the origins of the welfare state nonetheless.

PRO-NATALISM

Concern over France’s declining birthrate was longstanding by the interwar years. Indeed, the by-then powerful pro-natalist movement had its roots deep in the 19th century. Anxiety over depopulation had percolated among nationalist academics before the Franco-Prussian War in 1870-71, but undoubtedly France’s defeat in that conflict heightened disquiet and made the birthrate a political rather than a strictly academic concern. Studies of the problem produced by a growing number of demographers fuelled fears of French decline. The data seemed alarming. From 1871 to 1911, for example, the French population grew from 36.1 to 39.3 million, which represented a growth rate of just 8.6% over that 40-year period. Within that same timeframe, by comparison, the German population expanded by 60% to 65 million.22 Given the spread of social Darwinism and its ethos, coined by the Englishman Herbert Spencer, of the “survival of the fittest,”23 many took such figures as signs that France was losing ground to its fitter German neighbour...
and thus risked extinction. By the end of the 19th century, therefore, raising the birthrate had become an imperative for the political elite.

Civil society also began to mobilize for the pro-natalist cause. The key organization, eventually titled the Alliance nationale pour l’accroissement de la population française, was founded by demographer Dr. Jacques Bertillon in 1896. The group’s original membership provided a hint of the influence it would grow to exert as it included many well-known figures such as Émile Zola and the Orléanist pretender to the French throne.24 By the end of World War One, itself a further catalyst to fear over population decline, the Alliance was positioned as the leading proponent of pro-natalist policies in the country and in 1920 the energetic and well-connected 34-year-old Fernand Boverat became its secretary-general.25

Thanks in part to the Alliance the pervasiveness of the interwar panic over the decline in France’s birthrate on the political right cannot be overstated. In Cheryl Koos’ words, pro-natalists presented the decision about whether or not to have children as “the choice between life or death” for the nation.26

Within the political press, the newspaper Le Petit démocrate, which in 1925 became the tribune for the Catholic conservative party, the Parti démocrate populaire, was a centre of pro-natalist advocacy. The editors’ motivations were clear. As a report on a festival thrown by the Maternal Mutuality Committee in Noisy-le-Sec noted, “France needs children to preserve her rightful place in the world ....”27 But while prominent in the crusade to repopulate France, Le Petit démocrate was far from alone. A favoured method to heighten popular fears there and elsewhere was to publish statistics showing the number of war dead, the number of children who were not born as a consequence of the war, and, most commonly, the long-term downward trend of France’s population growth in comparison to growth rates elsewhere in Europe.28 That this was a military and social catastrophe was repeated incessantly. One commentator even claimed that by 1938 Germany would be able to field 1,200,000 men in uniform to France’s 120,000, and French agriculture would be all but defunct.29 Le Petit démocrate likewise reported annually on German demographics, as in 1925 when the paper noted that the German birthrate had increased in 1924 while infant mortality had declined. The French numbers, the author pointed out, were much less favourable.30 In another sign of the prevalence of anxiety over France’s relative infertility, it was common practice for the oldest member of the Chamber of Deputies to highlight the pressing need to rectify the problem in his annual address to the chamber at the beginning of each calendar year. Thus, Louis Andrieux, for example, referenced France’s demographic decrepitude in his 1924 speech and called for his fellow parliamentarians to take action.31
PRO-NATALISM AND RACE

As mentioned above, what commentators meant by race was not always clear, but Carole Paligot demonstrates that by the interwar years the term most frequently referred to either the French or the white European race, as social scientists, politicians, and bureaucrats created and adhered to pseudo-scientific biological distinctions between peoples. Such thinking and behavior can fairly be called “racist.” Pierre-André Taguieff defines racism as, “the absolutizing of difference, the naturalizing or the essentializing of differences, whether perceptible or imagined.”

Beyond a doubt, pro-natalists thought in terms of race. Henry Spont, for instance, argued that France should direct its efforts to lowering the infant mortality rate alongside raising the birthrate, and titled his article, “For the Future of the Race.” Similarly, Jacques Doriot insisted that a state headed by his fascist Parti populaire français would take the necessary steps to increase French fertility and thereby “renew the race.” The conservative paper, La Nation, meanwhile, lamented the bleak “future of the [French] race” given its infertility and blamed the problem on “the socialist virus.”

The influence of racial thinking on pro-natalism was most obvious when questions of immigration arose. Immigration was often seen as tied to the problem of “dénatalité” (the declining birthrate) as commentators dubbed the perceived demographic crisis. Conservative Louis Duval-Arnould, for example, combined pro-natalism with a fierce xenophobia when he argued in 1926 that “Immigration itself cannot protect us from depopulation, it appears instead as an invasion destructive to the race and admits the most undesirable elements. We must therefore return the family to its fecundity of days past.”

This sort of language carried on into the 1930s. Maurice Rondet-Saint of the right-of-centre party, the Alliance démocratique, worried about “the more prolific races,” including the “semi-Asiatic” Soviet Union overwhelming France by force of numbers; the reporter on social politics for the conservative political party the Fédération républicaine at its 1938 congress, meanwhile, warned of a pending “national suicide,” thanks to the low birthrate and foretold that “France, where three million foreigners already throng, will fall prey to its prolific neighbours.”

In short, the evidence provides ample support for Elisa Camiscioli’s recent finding that for French commentators and policy-makers, pro-natalism and immigration were intertwined as issues of concern to racial hygiene. This persistent combination of pro-natalism with hostility to immigration, moreover, helped to fuel a rising tide of xenophobia in interwar France. From 1919 to 1924 roughly one million immigrants entered the country largely to answer France’s labour shortage due to the demand for workers created by
postwar reconstruction and by the dearth of men of working age: over 16% of enlisted men had died from 1914 to 1918. By 1931, the number of immigrant and foreign workers had increased to around three million. The fact that these immigrants played a crucial role in France’s interwar prosperity did not prevent widespread resentment at their presence.41

When the Great Depression began to affect France in the early 1930s, and competition for work became evermore intense, these xenophobic sentiments became more fully expressed. One highly prejudicial outcome for immigrant workers was that they, along with their female co-workers, were the first to be laid off when factories scaled back production in response to reduced demand. Even the government pursued a policy of open discrimination, mandating as of 1932 that only 5% of public sector jobs could be held by non-citizens.42 This wave of xenophobia in the 1930s moreover began to take on an anti-Semitic tone as Sephardic Jews from Eastern Europe, visually and culturally distinct from the “true French,” and indeed from France’s indigenous Jewish population, arrived on French territory in large numbers. According to the French government’s figures, by 1938 there were an estimated 60,000 central and eastern European Jewish refugees in the country, 42,000 of whom were in France illegally.43 Popular xenophobia and anti-Semitism, moreover, coalesced with their more intellectually respectable variants. Paligot illustrates, for example, that the 1930s witnessed a new generation of anthropologists who espoused biological anti-Semitism, while Camiscioli likewise demonstrates a hardening of official, popular, and academic attitudes in the metropole against métissage between whites and people “of colour.”44

In sum, by the 1930s, there was a potent brew in France generally to some degree and on the French right in particular of pro-natalism, racism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism. Not surprisingly, this territory proved fertile ground for a eugenicist politics as well.

**NEO-MALTHUSIANISM AND EUGENICISM**

Upon its founding in 1912-13, the French Eugenics Society counted prominent men of both the centre-right and centre-left among its ranks. Particularly noteworthy were the high number of members whose politics were republican and left-of-centre. Among these, for example, were many “solidarist” Radicals, who believed the family to be the cornerstone of social solidarity; the solidarist former premier Léon Bourgeois, for example, served as the Society’s first honorary president, and Paul Doumer, a Radical deputy, the past governor of Indochina, and a future president of the Republic, addressed the society’s inaugural meeting on the subject of degeneration; there were also many Socialists among the Society’s early adherents.45 Members of the society would continue to
be influential in the interwar period. Member and Socialist Dr. Sicard de Plauzoles was a vice-president of the powerful civil liberties union, the *Ligue des droits de l’homme*, for example, and the obstetrician Dr. Adolphe Pinard, a parliamentary deputy and a vice-president and then president of the society, convinced the government to open a school of puericulture in Paris and to mandate the teaching of child care to female students in the public education system.46

While eugenicists could be found across the political spectrum in France, one group of leftists became especially influential: the neo-Malthusians. The neo-Malthusians were sexual radicals who believed that to avoid a Malthusian crisis, or at least to minimize the misery of the lower classes, working-class men and women should be educated about methods of contraception. This would, they theorized, allow the poor to decrease their fertility and thereby improve their standard of living. Like the pro-natalists, neo-Malthusians first emerged in the mid-to-late-19th century. Foremost among them was the schoolteacher Paul Robin, a member of the first socialist international and a one-time associate of Karl Marx and Mikhail Bakunin. In 1896 Robin founded the League of Human Regeneration, coincidentally the same year that Bertillon initiated the pro-natalist *Alliance*.47 Naturally, Robin, his league, and his disciples were loathed by the pro-natalists for encouraging the poor to limit family size through birth control. Bertillon went so far as to label Robin’s treatises on birth control “criminal propaganda.”48 Bertillon’s view eventually prevailed: in 1920 France criminalized the distribution of contraceptive literature and materials, as well as abortion.49

That Robin was a eugenicist as well as a neo-Malthusian was indicated from the title of his league, as well as that of his journal, *Régenération*.50 The linkage between birth control enthusiasts and eugenicists was, in fact, typical across the western world, as is indicated by the fact that Robin and other French neo-Malthusians took their inspiration from their British counterparts.51 Thus, while Robin’s desire to limit the birthrate was seemingly primarily motivated by compassion for the poor, he also hoped that a more selective process of reproduction might regenerate the race and improve France’s human stock. This view, moreover, was shared by many of his followers. The feminist Nelly Roussel, for example, invoked horticultural imagery to argue that bad seeds should not be allowed to grow, while her fellow neo-Malthusian, Dr. Édouard Toulouse, inveighed against encouraging workers to reproduce indiscriminately lest they not produce “healthy and well-cultivated” children.52 Herein lay the grounds for a future rapprochement between the pro-natalists and neo-Malthusians: although politically in opposite camps, both groups were concerned with racial regeneration even though at this early stage the pro-natalists sought the cure for
what ailed the French race in “quantity” while the neo-Malthusians preferred to focus on “quality.”

In the interwar years, the coterie of leftist eugenicists and their ideas found considerable resonance in French politics. In the Socialist Party the redoubtable feminist Louise Saumoneau, for example, declared in 1929 that “We no longer want to see alcoholics and those infected with venereal diseases perpetuate unconsciously the race of degenerates.” Saumoneau did not state what measures she favoured to prevent such unconscious “perpetuation” of degeneracy but any such measure was bound to involve coercion of some kind.

Fear of degenerative venereal diseases among left-wing commentators like Saumoneau most often focused on syphilis. As Daniel Pick among others has noted, syphilis exercised a particular and horrible fascination for those who feared racial degeneration. The Communist “Doctoresse Nadia” explained her fears to her readers, “Syphilis is a scourge that has always devastated and decimated humanity, ravaged the population in the present, and threatened the future.” The fixation on syphilis had two origins: the disease came from “degenerate” promiscuity and it led to mental debilitation; syphilis was thus tailor-made for the fretful eugenicist imagination. Communist Georges Levy, for instance, labelled the disease “an important factor in our depopulation.” Syphilitic parents’ children were “idiots, epileptics etc.,” and suffered frequently from mental retardation or paralysis. Late 19th and early 20th-century specialists like the German physician Iwan Bloch and his French colleague Alfred Fournier argued that syphilis was transferrable from both parents to their children through “inheritance,” that the disease caused extremely high infant mortality rates, and that children who survived with syphilis carried “stigmata of degeneration,” including “malformations of the nose, the ears, and the palate, dwarfishness, deaf-mutism, malformations of the external and internal sexual organs, rickets, epilepsy, and mental weakness.” Fournier was particularly active in the crusade against syphilis, founding the influential French Society of Sanitary and Moral Prophylaxis in 1899 to campaign against the disease’s spread and effect. In truth, though not as common as early 20th century physicians and eugenicists like Fournier feared, infants can “inherit” congenital syphilis from their mothers (but not their fathers) through the transmission of the bacterium Treponema pallidum; fetuses with syphilis are stillborn more than 50% of the time, and the list of symptoms of the disease is indeed long and serious. Needless to say, however, syphilis does not modify its victims’ DNA and therefore does not contribute to the degeneration of the species or “race.”

Similarly, Saumoneau’s fears about alcoholism as racially degenerative were common. Catholic feminist Pauline Le Cormier, for instance, feared that drunkards were “intoxicating … the race” and lamented,
her perception, the growing number of parents producing “children who give all the signs of being the offspring of alcoholics.” The Radical Party’s Denise Moran meanwhile played on the theme of racial degeneration when she alerted her readers to the “growing peril” that “the number of abnormal children [had] doubled since 1914,” and assured them that, “the mental retard … is generally issued from epileptic, alcoholic, or syphilitic parents.” Like with syphilis, 19th and early 20th-century doctors and researchers recognized that alcoholism could affect offspring but did not properly comprehend either how that happened or what effects were produced. Working from their incomplete understanding, many, like France’s Victor Magnan, concluded nonetheless that defects produced in children thanks to alcoholic parents became ingrained and were then passed on to succeeding generations. Thus, experts understood alcoholism as a source of racial degeneration.

Today doctors’ comprehension of the problem is more advanced. “Fetal alcohol syndrome” can be caused by a mother abusing alcohol while her fetus is in the womb but not by alcoholism per se—an alcoholic who abstains from drinking during her pregnancy does not endanger her fetus. Alcoholism does indeed impair its victims in a variety of ways, but the idea that it leads to racial degeneration has been debunked.

That syphilis, alcoholism, and other reputed wellsprings of degeneration were either phantom or misapprehended menaces, however, did not make them appear any less real to interwar observers on the left. Like Doctoresse Nadia and others, Socialist journalist Anna Blum too feared the degenerative effects of venereal diseases. She also displayed a marked racism against North Africans. Expressing concern about the pernicious effects of French soldiers mixing with the natives during France’s pacification campaign in Morocco, she wrote “What sort of citizens will they be later with clouded senses of judgment, with illnesses of all sorts contracted during games of love, and possibly, with characters become despotic and indifferent to desire? The well-being and the future of our race count for more than the conquest of a country!” The statutes of the group of Socialist women, in fact, included a clause stipulating that the Party’s parliamentarians were to keep them abreast of all issues concerning “women, children, and the race.” Not surprisingly, given the French left (like the right) coded women as guarantors of the family, child welfare, education, and social and racial hygiene, left-wing women like Roussel, Saumoneau, “Doctoresse” Nadia, Blum and others adopted eugenicism or something like it as part of their worldview.

Given this fact, it is not surprising that the Socialist and Communist parties were hostile to pro-natalism in the 1920s. While it is true that for most Socialists and Communists that opposition stemmed from the view that unrestrained procreation meant “famine wages” for the working class and that the problem of depopulation was the fault of the
capitalist system, for a significant minority a concern for racial hygiene helped determine their hostility. Within the Communist Party many embraced a pro-choice position on abortion motivated by both compassion for poor mothers and a desire to maintain the quality of the race. Georges Levy, for example, argued in favour of allowing abortions to prevent “syphilis” from being spread from one generation to the next. This was consonant with the neo-Malthusian position on the issue.

A cause dear to the heart of Socialist Amélie Vincent, the building of “healthy” public housing for the urban poor, attracted a good many left-wing eugenicists. Vincent’s own language was suggestive as she declared that it was “high time, in order to protect the race,” to improve the state of public housing in the country. Similarly, Sellier devoted much of his political career to urban planning and used his position as the mayor of the Parisian suburb of Suresnes to experiment with public housing. He was particularly keen to integrate green spaces into modern neighbourhoods likely because, like many who worried about the devolution of the race, he believed urban spaces devoid of greenery to be degenerative. Such fears also plagued the mind of the Radical Party leader, Édouard Herriot, the mayor of Lyon and premier of the Republic from 1924 to 1926 and in 1932. Herriot bemoaned the sorry physical state of the urban masses and fingered syphilis, tuberculosis, and alcoholism as responsible. He concluded, “To construct a healthy race it is indispensable to build hygienic housing.”

Others directed their concerns about racial hygiene in different directions. Deputy Victor Augagneur, for example, a prominent member of the Ligue des droits de l’homme and formerly both the mayor of Lyon and governor of Madagascar, was deeply anxious about the problem of miscegenation in the colonies. As he remarked, “Métis … are too numerous in our colonies. Frenchmen … have a strong tendency to unite temporarily with indigenous women.” Interestingly, the left-wing Augagneur’s concern with miscegenation was shared by many of the leaders of France’s first avowedly fascist organization, the Faisceau, who believed that there was a danger of France’s racial stock becoming polluted in the colonies.

Augagneur’s desire to avoid métissage ran counter to the indiscriminate promotion of the birthrate that many called for in the 1920s. A slew of measures militated against the selective breeding that eugenicists desired. Abortionists faced stiff penalties, contraceptive literature was outlawed, and, generally speaking, the state tried to coerce men and women into having larger families without much consideration to their supposed racial suitability. Socialist deputy Armand Charpentier’s attack on injudicious pro-natalism was indicative of the frustration that eugenicists felt with the unparticular promotion of births:
It would be truly strange if while horticulturalists are encouraged to select the most productive trees and breeders to improve the animal races, only the human race was denied the benefits of Science. Can we ask lunatics, syphilitics, alcoholics, and the tubercular to transmit their diseases? That would be nonsense, what am I saying! A crime against humanity—which no one could defend. However, our enemies don’t fight us on scientific terrain ….

Charpentier, in other words, wanted fewer children in order to ensure the healthiness of the racial strain. The idea of letting undesirables procreate was “a crime against humanity.” Charpentier’s Socialist colleague Alice Jouenne felt as he did. She warned against a criminal underclass of “degenerates” who had been born malformed thanks to hereditary disease and recommended their institutionalization. Jouenne and Charpentier’s thinking mimicked Robin’s. He too worried that modern medicine had impeded the process of natural selection: the weak were surviving, thus human intervention should prevent their being born.

Robin’s theories also informed the thinking of the Radical Dr. Toulouse, a friend of Sellier’s. A prominent advocate of sexual education, Toulouse shared Charpentier’s concerns and advocated sterilization accordingly:

if the state is going to pay the costs of births [among the working class as Toulouse was advocating to raise the birthrate] it must also control them, because it would be absurd to encourage the birth of healthy and diseased infants equally. And so, should we regulate marriage with the corollary that we forbid certain unions? How? The United States … does not hesitate to sterilize individuals whose products would likely be undesirable.

Reading between the lines, Toulouse may also have been an advocate for euthanasia. “With domestic animals,” he noted approvingly in 1933, “a female that lacks the desired characteristics is eliminated and her defective products are sacrificed.” Toulouse’s fellow traveler Sicard de Plauzoles was more direct, openly endorsing the euthanizing of human “defective products” in 1908. How the good doctor squared this with his commitment to civil liberties as a vice-president of the Ligue des droits de l’homme is unknown.

Nor were such sentiments limited to the left-wing parties’ margins as Sellier’s musings about applying to humanity “the same precautions that one takes for the selection of domesticated animals and plants” suggest. As he wrote in a 1928 letter, “defectives and the sickly are a burden on society.” What was to become of those deemed burdensome after Sellier’s selection was unsaid, but one can conjecture that he too might have supported a policy of sterilization, and the fact that as the minister of health Sellier commissioned a study to discover the number of mentally and physically handicapped children in the school system provides food for thought. Equally suggestive is the fact that
Sellier was a founding member of the “Association d’études sexologiques” in 1931. The association’s journal, Problème sexuel, was subtitled, “morals, eugenics, hygiene, legislation,” and printed several articles endorsing sterilization during its run from 1933 to 1935. Sellier was on the editorial committee of the journal as was Victor Basch, the widely respected president of the Ligue des droits de l’homme.85

While the neo-Malthusians and their disciples were leftwing, on the right the eugenicist mentality was also pronounced. L. Camuzet at the conservative paper La Nation for example, pointed out that while encouraging births was well and good, “60 to 75” out of 100 children were born with hereditary diseases, inherited principally, he claimed, from their mothers. He suggested that preventative measures taken in advance of impregnation would do more to improve the health of the race than any monies designed to encourage procreation. Ironically, he titled his article, “No democracy without pity for the disadvantaged.”86 Whether the preventative measures Camuzet favoured included sterilization remained unclear. Gaëtan Maire of the fascistic Parti social français (formerly the Croix de feu), meanwhile, rejected sterilization as “negative eugenics” but strongly endorsed “positive eugenics,” which he defined principally as requiring young people to take medical exams prior to marriage so that prospective spouses would know if their betrothed were carrying “bad genes.”87

Maire’s vision of “positive eugenics” had wide purchase, and indeed, the idea of the state requiring some sort of physical examination of those applying for wedding licences enjoyed a good deal of bipartisan support. In 1927, the right-of-centre Pinard, at that time a deputy, proposed that, in the words of his bill: “All French citizens … not be able to register their civil marriages until they have presented a medical certificate, dated from the previous day, attesting that they are not manifesting any appreciable symptom of a contagious disease.”88 The term “contagious” in particular was a buzzword for eugenicists, as fear of contagion spreading hereditary defects from generation to generation had grown acute since the work of Louis Pasteur on bacteria in the 1880s.89 As Dr. Jenny Héricourt noted, Pinard’s proposal was aimed at preventing the spread of syphilis and gonorrhea. Héricourt, notably, approved in principle of Pinard’s proposals but did not support them because she thought they would prove impracticable.90 The Ligue des droits de l’homme had no such reservations, endorsing Pinard’s proposal at the urging of Sicard de Plauzoles.91 Pinard’s ideas similarly found a sympathetic hearing in the chamber of deputies, although they did not become law until 1942.92

Koos comments insightfully that pro-natalism provided the grounds for bipartisan alliances and cooperation.93 Sellier and Toulouse’s friendship provides a hint that eugenicism functioned in a similar fashion.
In addition to Toulouse, Sellier’s familiar included the one-time neo-socialist and later fascist and Nazi collaborator Marcel Déat and the Nazi mayor of Stuttgart, Karl Strölin. What bound these ideologically opposed men together was their common eugenicist mentality as well as their shared belief that the application of science to urban planning could improve the racial stock. Add to these otherwise odd friendships the fact that Dr. Toulouse was an intimate of the famed eugenicist and Nobel Prize winning scientist Alexis Carrel, and a picture begins to form of a bipartisan network of eugenicist thinkers striving towards the goal of perfecting the race.

THE CONVERGENCE OF EUGENICISM AND PRO-NATALISM

In addition to this set of eugenicists near the pinnacle of power in interwar France, the period, especially the 1930s, also witnessed a coming together of the eugenicist and pro-natalist causes. Some figures like Pinard had always had feet planted firmly in both camps: the obstetrician had helped the pro-natalist cause by arguing that women who did not have at least three children were more likely to get neurasthenia, a malady particularly associated with women that many eugenicists believed to be both a symptom and cause of racial degeneration. Beyond the fact that key figures like Pinard held pro-natalist and eugenic convictions equally, however, the 1930s also witnessed both pro-natalists using the language of racial hygiene and eugenicists embracing the cause of raising the birthrate. The right-wing Fédération républicaine’s 1935 party program, for example, combined these elements. On the one hand, the Fédération favoured a host of measures to raise the birthrate such as increased family allowances (roughly equivalent to Canadian baby bonuses) and tax breaks for large families. On the other, it employed an inflammatory language of racial degeneration to stress the urgency of pursuing these policies, arguing that depopulation “constitutes a serious menace for the future of the French race and nation.” Moreover, under the heading “social hygiene,” the program pushed for a “war” against prostitution and venereal diseases, which it dubbed a “cause of depopulation, declining morality, and the physical decay of the race.” Clearly, while the party did not embrace anything so radical as sterilization, the eugenicist agenda of racial hygiene now accompanied its longstanding pro-natalism.

Similarly, by the late 1930s, the Catholic Parti démocrate populaire journalist Jacques Batuaud sounded quite comfortable with the idea that not all births were desirable. As he cautioned while promoting pro-natalist measures, “We must ensure that these children are physically healthy,” so as to safeguard “the long-term survival of the race.”
More unexpected, perhaps, than the right embracing the eugenicist agenda and language of racial hygiene is the degree to which the socialist left—the ardent opponent of pro-natalism in the 1920s—joined the right in pushing for pro-natalist measures in the 1930s. Gone were leftist denunciations of bourgeois hypocrisy regarding the demographic crisis; in their place appeared pro-natalist articles and columns. Socialist journalist Sixte-Quenin, for example, who had once lampooned the right’s pro-natalism, wrote a column in 1934 that applauded the efforts of conservative deputy Georges Pernot to increase the birthrate by helping large families.99 Similarly, Sixte-Quenin’s Socialist comrade Dr. Weill-Raynal parroted right-wing pro-natalists in contrasting France’s unimpressive demographics with Germany’s healthier numbers, and insisted that “Socialists must not ignore demographic problems” because they could have “profound repercussions.”100 The Socialists, as part of the Popular Front, supported and even initiated a swath of pro-natalist measures in the second half of the 1930s. Indeed, the Socialists’ course became so thoroughly pro-natalist that a law they brought forward extending family allowances to new categories of workers passed in the chamber by a vote of 566 to 1, and their efforts on behalf of population growth drew praise from determined political opponents such as the fascist Parti populaire français.101

By the time of the Popular Front, Communists also felt that they could not ignore these “problems.” At the Party’s 1937 national congress in Montreuil, for instance, party leader Maurice Thorez made a revealing admission: “We … desire that measures be taken in order to resolve the grave crisis of the declining birthrate that menaces the very existence of our people.”102 Such a statement would have been unthinkable in the Communist Party of the 1920s. On another occasion, the Communists’ newspaper L’Humanité announced proudly that Thorez had become the godfather to the 15th child of a Communist family in the Ardennes. At the child’s baptism, Thorez applauded the vigorous and large families of French peasants.103 Here was the leader of French communism sounding like the head of the Fédération républicaine.

**PRO-NATALISM, EUGENICS, AND POLICY**

Thus, by the mid-1930s the left and the right agreed broadly on both pro-natalism and eugenicism. The convergence of pro-natalism and eugenics in 1930s France did not produce a systematic campaign of sterilization of the physically or mentally unfit as happened elsewhere.104 Yet, the absence of such an episode in French history should not blind historians to the impact these currents had on French policy and on the making of the welfare state.
Laura Frader emphasizes the importance of the pro-natalist movement to the formation of social policy in the interwar years and beyond. In that case, the connection is undeniable as the French government enacted a broad range of measures that pro-natalists had long urged. These included extended family allowances, a series of tax breaks for large families, the encouragement of the “family wage” in industry that saw pay indexed to family size, restrictions on the sale of pornography, and the introduction of demography as a compulsory subject in school. An especially crucial turning point was the “Family Code” enacted by the Édouard Daladier government on the eve of World War Two, which Boverat hailed as the best piece of family-oriented legislation in the world. That the enactment of the family code represented the new bipartisan pro-natalist consensus is captured by the political parties’ universally positive reactions to it.

The impact of eugenics on policy was less obvious but no less important. First, the ostensibly pro-natalist measures of the 1930s, coming as they did in the moment of convergence between the pro-natalist and eugenicist agendas, should be considered, in part, eugenicist efforts. Second, there were dozens of initiatives in a broad range of fields coloured by a eugenicist mentality. Henri Sellier’s career is again demonstrative. He not only served as the minister of health but was an important pioneer—perhaps France’s most important pioneer—in urban planning and public housing. Divorcing his interest in this field from his eugenicism as his recent biographers do, is a mistake: the two interests complemented and informed each other. Similarly, it is impossible not to see Sellier’s efforts as minister to co-ordinate France’s disparate health and welfare services and set national standards as stemming at least in part from his concern for racial hygiene. The fact that Sellier’s standardizing project was followed up upon and completed by the Vichy government highlights just how important to the development of the welfare state it was and the degree to which it was a measure supported by both the left and right. Likewise, France today boasts a first-class system of public nurseries and daycares: one of the first mayors in the country to pursue public childcare provision was none other than Sellier. Surely, Sellier’s interest in daycares originated at least partly in his desire to promote racially healthy children. Thus, the system of public daycare provision in France owes its existence in part to the eugenics movement.

Beyond Sellier’s noteworthy career, the eugenicist mentality no doubt affected policy in other areas as well. Thus, for example, the Popular Front encouraged citizens to exercise in an effort to promote healthy bodies and, by extension, racial hygiene. The Blum government appointed Léo Lagrange as under-secretary of state for sports and for the organization of leisure and he poured government money into
building stadia and sporting infrastructure and encouraging popular participation in physical activities. Lagrange and the Popular Front advanced, in other words, a form of “positive eugenics.” In July 1936, for example, at the height of the Popular Front, the Socialist and Communist parties’ joint auxiliary organization, the “Fédération sportive et gymnique du travail,” was busily organizing an array of activities that included: swimming, cross country, sprint, and cycling races, a greco-roman wrestling championship, a rhythmic dance competition, and a tennis tournament. Similarly, in a logic in harmony with “degenerationists,” Lagrange sponsored youth hostels in the countryside in order to encourage working-class teenagers and young adults to get out of the enervating cities. The Socialist newspaper *Le Populaire* helpfully published a list of ideologically suitable youth hostels across France and encouraged the party’s youth to take advantage of them. The fascination with healthy, youthful bodies was evident in the Socialists and Communists’ imagery as well. Cartoons in the parties’ press, for example, regularly showed physically robust youthful young men in particular. Figure 1 is a typical example from *Le Populaire*, and shows a well-muscled young man breaking the chains of capitalist oppression. Figure 2, on the other hand, is from the Communist women’s journal, *L’Ouvrière*, and is particularly evocative. The bare-chested man is the emblematic Communist who stands ready, among other things, to protect “maternity [and] childhood.” Typically of the genre, in these images the idealized figures are white, which coalesces with Frader and Camiscioli’s analyses suggesting a hostility, even on the left, to non-white immigrants. While these images are not eugenicist per se, they do reveal a fixation on youthful physicality that was demonstrative of the growing concern with racial hygiene.

The concern with promoting healthy youthful bodies coincided with the Popular Front’s pro-natalist course and suggests a desire to promote racial hygiene. Similarly, all debates about social and public health concerns, whether under the Popular Front or another government, such as prostitution, venereal disease, alcoholism, and maternal care were invariably infused with eugenicist themes, particularly as eugenicist doctors like Pinard, de Plauzoles, Héricourt, and Toulouse gravitated to discussion of these issues. Héricourt, for example, harangued her readers about the danger of alcoholism for “the race”; and Pinard pushed hard for the introduction of childcare into the curriculum for girls. The policies that flowed from these discussions—“domestic science” became compulsory for girls in school under Vichy, for example—can also be said to have sprang in part from the eugenics movement accordingly.
Figure 1


Figure 2

CONCLUSION

The interwar years were a crucial period in the origins of the French welfare state. Social outreach was dramatically expanded, public benefits of various kinds were extended into a host of new fields and categories, and the state newly concerned itself with the physical, mental, and hereditary well-being of its citizens through a variety of means.

This state expansion was fueled by two phenomena that dominated the period, particularly the 1930s—pro-natalism and eugenicism. Pronatalism originated on the centre-right in the mid-to-late 19th century, and in the 1920s the Socialists and Communists remained its committed opponents. With the advent of the Popular Front, however, the left was converted to the pro-natalist cause. Conversely, eugenics was more influential among leftists including the neo-Malthusians until the interwar years but was increasingly finding adepts on the right by the 1930s. This was reflected in the language of many pro-natalists who increasingly nuanced their message to suggest that only the racially fit should be encouraged to procreate. Simultaneously, many eugenicists embraced the pro-natalist cause and insisted not just on the birth of racially desirable children, but on the birth of as many of them as possible.

This convergence of pro-natalism and eugenicism helped to produce the flowering of institutions and legislation, particularly under the Popular Front but also before and after, that laid the foundations for the welfare state. Accordingly, while Frader has documented the impact of pro-natalism on the French welfare state’s origins, historians need to consider the influence of eugenics as well, for doing so complicates the view of the French welfare state as arising inexorably from progressive and well-meaning social and political reform. As eugenicist thinking affected policy on an ever-widening range of issues, musings on sterilization and the undesirability of miscegenation could be found across the political spectrum. As the 1930s drew to a close, the right and left’s definition of “citizens useful to their country and to humanity” became evermore restrictive. Come June 1940 with the fall of France to Nazi Germany, those labeled as outside that definition found themselves in potentially mortal peril. One of Vichy’s responses to France’s defeat was to launch a ham-fisted investigation into the causes of the French race’s supposed degeneration; another was the denaturalization of some 150,000 “foreigners” who had obtained their citizenship post-1927. This was an important step towards the deportation to Nazi death camps of roughly 76,000 Jews; those without citizenship—defined as the most racially undesirable—were the first to be so-expelled.
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NOTES

6 Henri Sellier, “Ce que le code de la famille a malheureusement négligé,” *La Lumière*, 23 February 1940, p. 3.
15 Carol, *L'Histoire de l'eugénisme en France*; and Schneider, *Quality and Quantity*.
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17 See Carol, L’Histoire de l’eugénisme en France; Andrès Horacio Reggiani, God’s Eugenacist: Alexis Carrel and the Sociobiology of Decline (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007); Schneider, Quality and Quantity. Notably, both Carol and Schneider devote sections of their studies to political debates in which eugenicists openly intervened; however, in so restricting themselves they miss the broader impact that eugenicism had in shaping the mentality and thus the policies of the period.


26 Cheryl Koos, “Gender, Anti-individualism, and Nationalism,” p. 711.

28 See, for example, “Des chiffres éloquents: Ce que la guerre a coûté,” L’Ère nouvelle, 27 February 1921, p. 1.
30 “La population de l’Allemagne en 1924, a augmenté de 500.000 Habitants,” Le petit démocrate, 26 July 1925, p. 3.
32 Paligot, La République raciale, p. 151-278.
34 Henry Spont, “Pour l’avenir de la race,” L’Ère nouvelle, 10 November 1922, p. 1.
36 “L’avenir de la race,” La Nation, 1 August 1931, p. 725.
38 Maurice Rondet-Saint, "Natalité,” L’Alliance démocratique, 5-12 February 1937, p. 2.
40 Camiscioli, Reproducing the French Race, p. 21-49.
44 Paligot, La République raciale, p. 213-14; Camiscioli, Reproducing the French Race, p. 85-96.
48 As quoted in Schneider, Quantity and Quality, p. 35.
50 Accampo, Blessed Motherhood, p. 42.
51 McLaren, Sexuality and Social Order, p. 1.
52 Accampo, Blessed Motherhood, p. 215; Dr. Toulouse, “Comment repeupler?” L’Ère nouvelle, 7 February 1920, p. 1.
55 Doctoresse Nadia, "Quelques réflexions sur la syphilis," L’Ouvrière, 4 December 1924, p. 2.
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60 Pauline Le Cormier, "Alcool et mode," Le Petit démocrate, 20 July 1930, p. 3.


62 Schneider, Quality and Quantity, p. 21-22.


65 “Statuts du groupe des femmes du parti Socialiste,” La Femme Socialiste, November 1922, p. 3-4.


67 See, for example, Marie-Louise, "De la dépopulation," L'Ouvrière, 27 June 1922, p. 1; Compré Morel, "Le capitalisme contre la natalité," Le Populaire, 28 December 1923, p. 1.


69 Guerrand and Roisin, Le sexe apprivoisé, p. 42-43.


78 McLaren, Sexuality and Social Order, p. 99-100.


80 As quoted in Carol, L'Histoire de l'eugénisme en France, p. 164, n. 3.


82 Henri Sellier, "Ce que le code de la famille a malheureusement négligné."

83 As quoted in Guerrand and Moissinac, Henri Sellier, p. 158.

84 Reggiani, God's Eugenicist, p. 145-46.


88 As quoted in Dr. Héricourt, “Faut-il exiger des jeunes époux un certificat médical?” La Lumière, 14 May 1927, p. 10.

89 Héricourt, “Faut-il exiger des jeunes époux un certificat médical?”


93 Guerrand and Moissinac, *Henri Sellier*, p. 151-53. The authors speculate that it might have been his friendship with Strölin that saved Sellier from being sent to a concentration camp during the Nazi occupation.


96 Koos, “Engendering Reaction,” p. 31; Schneider, *Quantity and Quality*, p. 16.


104 See Black, *War against the Weak*; Kuhl, *The Nazi Connection*.


108 Guerrand and Moissinac, *Henri Sellier*.


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