

The executioner's shadow: Coerced sterilization and the creation of "Latin" eugenics in Chile

History of Science

1–23

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DOI: 10.1177/0073275318755533

journals.sagepub.com/home/hos**Sarah Walsh**

The Colour of Labour: The Racialized Lives of Migrants, European Research Council Project AdG 2015 - 695573, Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal

Abstract

Scholars such as Nancy Leys Stepan, Alexandra Minna Stern, Marius Turda and Aaron Gillette have all argued that the rejection of coerced sterilization was a defining feature of "Latin" eugenic theory and practice. These studies highlight the influence of neo-Lamarckism in this development not only in Latin America but also in parts of Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. This article builds upon this historiographical framework to examine an often-neglected site of Latin American eugenic knowledge production: Chile. By focusing on Chilean eugenicists' understandings of environment and coerced sterilization, this article argues that there was no uniquely Latin objection to the practice initially. In fact, Chilean eugenicists echoed concerns of eugenicists from a variety of locations, both "mainstream" and Latin, who felt that sterilization was not the most effective way to ensure the eugenic improvement of national populations. Instead, the article contends that it was not until the implementation of the 1933 German racial purity laws, which included coerced sterilization legislation, that Chilean eugenicists began to define their objections to the practice as explicitly Latin. Using a variety of medical texts which appeared in popular periodicals as well as professional journals, this article reveals the complexity of eugenic thought and practice in Chile in the early twentieth century.

Keywords

Eugenics, Chile, coerced sterilization, neo-Lamarckism, racial thought

In their 2014 study, *Latin Eugenics in Comparative Perspective*, Marius Turda and Aaron Gillette argued that, "Latin eugenicists shared more than just religious, cultural, and

Corresponding author:

Sarah Walsh, The Colour of Labour: The Racialized Lives of Migrants, European Research Council Project AdG 2015 - 695573, Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universidade de Lisboa, Av. Aníbal de Bettencourt 9, 1600-189 Lisboa, Portugal.

Email: sarah.walsh@ics.ulisboa.pt

linguistic ties; they also thought of themselves as representatives of a distinct type of Latin, ‘humanitarian’ civilization, reflected in their interpretation of eugenics.”¹ They go on to specify that nowhere was this distinction more relevant for Latin eugenicists than in their overwhelming rejection of coerced sterilization as a eugenic practice. For Turda and Gillette, along with many other historians of eugenics, objecting to legislation related to forcible sterilization of individuals identified as eugenically unfit is considered to be the defining feature of what constituted a Latin-style eugenic science. This contention is often supported with references to the role that Catholic intellectuals and eugenicists played in cultivating this aspect of Latin eugenics.²

An October 1940 article in *Estudios [Studies]*, a Chilean Catholic magazine, seems to support these scholarly claims. In it, physician Miguel Arezzi wrote, “The physician looks with distrust and aversion at whatever form of intervention that results in the diminishment or destruction of a manifestation of human life, because, behind a coerced mutilation, one can see taking shape in the distance, the shadow of the executioner.”³ Frankly discussing his concerns regarding coerced sterilization as eugenic practice, Arezzi’s florid statement highlights what has come to be considered a defining characteristic of so-called Latin eugenics. His ostensible Italian heritage, location in Chile, and choice to publish in a Catholic periodical seems to support this claim. However, by 1940, characterizing coerced sterilization as a gross overstepping of medical and legislative power was no longer restricted to Latin practitioners working at the fringes of the eugenic community. Indeed, by the end of the decade, the specter of Nazi atrocities perpetrated under the guise of social hygiene experiments helped to usher the very word “eugenics” out of use.

So, can Arezzi’s rejection of coerced sterilization as eugenic practice be attributed to his belonging to a distinctly “Latin” intellectual community? This article examines Chilean responses to coerced sterilization in an effort to answer that question. Scholars of eugenics have often noted the relative unpopularity of the measure, and other negative eugenic practices such as abortion and euthanasia, across what this special issue has

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1. Marius Turda and Aaron Gillette, *Latin Eugenics in Comparative Perspective* (Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), p. 128.
 2. Ibid. Alexandra Minna Stern, “‘The Hour of Eugenics’ in Veracruz, Mexico: Radical Politics, Public Health, and Latin America’s Only Sterilization Law,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 91(3) (2011): 431–44.
 3. Miguel Arezzi, “Consideraciones sobre la esterilización eugenésica,” *Estudios* 94 (1940): 4–20, 20. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
 4. Ibid. See also: Adriana Novoa and Alex Levine, *From Man to Ape: Darwinism in Argentina, 1870–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Marisa Miranda and Gustavo Vallejo (eds.), *Darwinismo social y eugenesia en el mundo latino* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI de Argentina Editores, 2005); Patience A. Schell, “Eugenics policy and practice in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Mexico,” in Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 477–92; Nancy Leys Stepan, *“The Hour of Eugenics”: Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Alexandra Minna Stern, “From mestizophilia to biotypology: racialization and science in Mexico, 1920–1960,” in Nancy P. Appelbaum, Anne S. Macpherson, and Karin Alejandra Rosemblatt (eds.), *Race and Nation in Modern Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), pp. 187–210.

identified as the Latin world.⁴ Yet it was one of the most controversial aspects of eugenic practice internationally and many eugenicists, not only in the Latin world, were concerned about its use, the role of the state in its implementation, as well as the very real health risks it presented for those undergoing the procedure.⁵ This indicates that, at least when considering coerced sterilization, the divide between Latin and mainstream eugenics might not be as stark as scholars (or eugenicists themselves) imagine prior to the 1930s.

Early twentieth-century objections to coerced sterilization, Latin or otherwise, are all the more intriguing for the historian of eugenics because decrying the practice as an obvious form of racism and genocide was one of the primary means of discrediting eugenics as a science in the post-World War II period.⁶ As such, contextualizing “Latin” resistance to coerced sterilization allows for a better understanding of the malleability of eugenics as a science and social movement. Rather than approach objections to coerced sterilization as simply the result of the power and influence of Catholicism in Latin America or the Latin world, this article traces the increasing ambivalence and skepticism regarding the effectiveness of coerced sterilization in Chile to better understand the development of a unique intellectual and scientific tradition there that was not as committed to biological determinism as a central tenet of human evolution that eventually came to be identified by the historical actors as “Latin.”⁷

One of the important contributing factors to this development was the influence of Comtean positivism among Latin American intellectuals throughout most of the nineteenth century. Historians of Darwinism in Argentina, Alex Levine and Adriana Novoa, argue that positivism fostered belief in, “the inevitability of progress as the historical force governing all peoples and producing universal results wherever civilization was

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5. It should be noted that the vast majority of the scholarly literature regarding coerced sterilization focuses on the practice in the United States, speaking to the influence of U.S. eugenic theory in overall scholarly examinations of eugenic science, see: Rebecca M. Kluchin, *Fit to Be Tied: Sterilization and Reproductive Rights in America, 1950–1980* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009); Mark A. Largent, *Breeding Contempt: The History of Coerced Sterilization in the United States* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008); Paul A. Lombardo, *Three Generations, No Imbeciles: Eugenics, the Supreme Court, and Buck v. Bell* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2008); Johanna Schoen, *Choice & Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization, and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2005); Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
 6. See footnote 4, also: Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Matthew James Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008); Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (New York: Knopf, 1985); Sharon Leon, *An Image of God: The Catholic Struggle with Eugenics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
 7. Thomas F. Glick, Miguel Angel Puig-Samper, and Rosaura Ruiz Gutierrez, *The Reception of Darwin in the Iberian World: Spain, Spanish America, and Brazil* (Boston: Kluwer Academic, 2001); Miranda and Vallejo, *Darwinismo social*; Novoa and Levine, *From Man to Ape*; Stepan, *The Hour of Eugenics*; Stern, “‘The Hour of Eugenics’ in Veracruz.”

embraced.”⁸ In this context, it is no surprise that both Latin American eugenic theory and practice were less receptive to biological determinism and the negative eugenic practices that often resulted from it. In the formulation of Latin American racial thought, eugenics was a tool meant to facilitate the human civilizing process, which was possible for everyone regardless of race, ethnicity, or ability. However, the emphasis on the possibility for advancement should not suggest that race and ethnicity lost their significance. Despite the claims of Latin American intellectuals that began as part of independence struggles in the early nineteenth century, the region was not without racial discrimination and prejudice. Indeed one of the more pernicious purposes of the development of a Latin hygienic movement was to protect Latin American elites from the racial stigma they felt strict Darwinism emanating from northern Europe and North America suggested.⁹ Even so, the emphasis on environment throughout the region distinguished the type of eugenic possibilities and futures available for national populations from those espoused in North America and northern Europe, which built upon stricter notions of biological determinism and hereditarianism.

Returning to Chile, where Arezzi published his article, the eugenic movement was characterized by an overwhelming belief in the racial homogeneity of the Chilean populace. Unlike racial ideologies developing in other parts of Latin America, which typically celebrated racial mixture as both a past and present reality, Chilean eugenicists claimed that the period of active racial mixture in Chile was essentially over.¹⁰ Chileans, it was contended, had not only surpassed their Latin American counterparts in terms of achieving the racial homogeneity to which they all nominally aspired; they also were a superior racial mixture.¹¹ These two claims relied primarily on the small indigenous population at the turn of the twentieth century as well as the belief that virtually no peoples of African descent spent meaningful time in Chile.¹² This created an environment in which one of

8. Alex Levine and Adriana Novoa, *Darwinistas!: The Construction of Evolutionary Thought in Nineteenth Century Argentina* (Boston: Brill, 2012), p. 48. An interesting study of how this type of thinking resulted in social exclusion, despite ostensible nods to inclusivity, is Julia Rodriguez’s *Civilizing Argentina: Science, Medicine, and the Modern State* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2006).

9. Novoa and Levine discuss the concerns raised by Darwinism in nineteenth-century Argentina at length throughout *Man to Ape*. They argue that these concerns were not simply racial, but rather that the potential racial inferiority of Latin Americans combined with their perceived (and occasionally self-declared) intellectual inferiority to European scientists. See pp. 3–14. Similarly, Walter D. Mignolo’s *The Idea of Latin America* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2005) also spends a good deal of time discussing the concerns within Latin Europe, as Darwinism began to inform reckonings of international relations, about the position of the “Latin” race in relation to the so-called superior “Anglo-Saxon” and “Nordic” races. One of his main contentions is that *latinité* was devised as a means to shore up the power and legacy of France, see pp. 58–9.

10. See: Sarah Walsh, “‘One of the Most Uniform Races of the Entire World’: Creole Eugenics and the Myth of Chilean Racial Homogeneity,” *Journal of the History of Biology* 48 (4) (2015): 613–39.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 624–9.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 629–32. Illustrative of the prevalence and persistence of this idea among scholars, Sarah C. Chambers’ recent work on the Chilean independence period uses the region’s demographic homogeneity to argue for the need for more careful scholarly consideration of Chile during the nineteenth century. See: Sarah C. Chambers, *Families in War and Peace: Chile from Colony to Nation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), p. 5.

the primary eugenic concerns throughout the first half of the twentieth century was a supposedly shrinking national population that was under siege from both disease and racial degeneration in the form of moral turpitude. In this context of relative racial homogeneity and superiority, limiting the number of adults able to reproduce was far from desirable. This, too, should be considered an important factor when evaluating the Chilean ambivalence toward coerced sterilization before there was a distinctly Latin set of arguments against it.

This article will discuss Chilean reactions and responses to coerced sterilization, especially in the 1930s, to highlight the different practical and theoretical aspects of eugenics as conceptualized in Latin America more generally. This, in turn, will allow me to consider the value and utility of identifying a transnational network of scientific experts and ideas as “Latin.” First, I will discuss scholarly treatments of coerced sterilization and eugenics. This will demonstrate how coerced sterilization existed adjacent to eugenic theory and practice in order to show that Latin objections should not be treated as aberrant or atypical. Next, the article will examine Chilean responses to coerced sterilization prior to the passage of the 1933 German sterilization law. While the practice was considered medically dubious before that time, after 1933 Chilean eugenicists began to mount an explicitly “Latin” campaign against the use of coerced sterilization. The final section of the article will discuss the development of that Latin identity and consider its links to postwar ideas about race and improvement. Ultimately, this article will demonstrate how the overwhelmingly negative response to coerced sterilization as eugenic practice not only in Chile, but throughout Latin America, allows for a new consideration of the movement away from biological determinism and hereditarianism in racial thought and science as well as the persistence of racialized groups as categories of scientific analysis after eugenics had fallen out of favor.

Coerced sterilization and the limits of “Latin” eugenics

Nancy Leys Stepan’s *The Hour of Eugenics* was the first English language monograph that explicitly referred to a Latin network of eugenic theorists and practitioners. She was so successful in this aspect of her argument that historian of eugenics Alexandra Minna Stern credited her with “latinizing eugenics.”¹³ One of the primary aspects of this latinization, beyond simply looking at eugenics in places other than the United States Germany or England, was Stepan’s ability to show how neo-Lamarckism influenced eugenic and biological thought in Latin America. Not only did she show how this worked in practice, she also insisted on treating this influence with the same academic rigor as Mendelism, which had received far more coverage in eugenic and biological literature up to that point.¹⁴ For example, Stepan wrote, “Many of the doctors and reformers who were drawn

13. Stern, “‘The Hour of Eugenics’ in Veracruz,” p. 432.

14. C.P. Blacker, *Eugenics: Galton and After* (Westport, CT: Hyperion Press, 1987); Carl N. Degler, *In Search of Human Nature: The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Mark H. Haller, *Eugenics: Hereditarian Attitudes in American Thought* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1984); Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*; Pauline M.H. Mazumdar, *Eugenics, Human Genetics, and Human Failings: The Eugenics Society, Its Sources and Its Critics in Britain*

into eugenics in Latin America were not readily persuaded of the correctness of the Weismannian–Mendelian point of view, however. This was less a matter of their being ‘out’ of the mainstream of genetics than of their being ‘in’ an alternative stream of tradition of Lamarckian hereditarian thought.”¹⁵ Stepan linked the preference for neo-Lamarckism directly to the existence of a Latin intellectual community by specifically tracing the influence of French theories of human development, biology, and anthropology in Latin America.¹⁶

“*The Hour of Eugenics*” also included a discussion of the only successful sterilization law in the region to highlight the differences between Latin American and ‘mainstream’ eugenic practice. Authorized by then governor of Veracruz Adalberto Tejeda on July 6, 1932, the Mexican law legalized eugenic sterilization for citizens identified as “idiots” and “delinquents,” among other things.¹⁷ The law also stipulated that recipients of the procedure would not be castrated, but would undergo a surgical sterilization, which was considered more humane by all practitioners at the time, Latin and otherwise.¹⁸ Stepan argued that almost as soon as the Veracruz law was passed, it was panned by the larger Mexican medical and eugenic communities.¹⁹ This condemnation, she argued, demonstrated how Latin American “preventive eugenics” disrupted the binary of positive and negative, hereditarian and environmental, divisions at work

(New York: Routledge, 1992). A notable exception to this was: Mark B. Adams (ed.), *The Wellborn Science: Eugenics in Germany, France, Brazil, and Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). Stepan contributed the chapter on Brazil.

15. Stepan, *The Hour of Eugenics*, p. 65.

16. Ibid, Stepan, *The Hour of Eugenics*, p. 11. The connections between parts of Latin America with France and Italy, especially as related to eugenic theory and practice, is also explored by Turda and Gillette. Their emphasis on these connections, perhaps over others, reflects the internal hierarchy of the Latin world that is discussed in the introduction, and best exemplified in Mignolo’s *The Idea of Latin America*. Roque’s article in this special issue gives another example of how the French influenced scientific practice in Latin countries.

17. Ibid, Stepan, *The Hour of Eugenics*, p. 132. It should be noted that, though these terms are obviously pejorative and racialized to the contemporary ear, they were understood to be verifiable medical and psychological states in the 1930s.

18. Largent discusses concerns regarding castration as a means of sterilization in comparison to surgical sterilization in the United States p. 17.

19. Stepan, *The Hour of Eugenics*, p. 133. It should be noted that individual physicians in the Latin world who did not object to coerced sterilization possibly performed the procedure on a case-by-case basis according to their own ideas about who was fit to be a parent. There is certainly a precedent within the United States that doctors did this for “therapeutic” reasons even before legislation that allowed them to do so. It is likely that doctors in Latin countries practiced in similar ways. However, there was no legislation outside of Mexico that authorized these practices in the early twentieth century. There have, however, been more recent efforts in Latin America to sterilize women without their knowledge or consent. This is especially true for women of color and indigenous women. See: Briggs, *Reproducing Empire*; Raúl Necochea López, *A History of Family Planning in Twentieth-Century Peru* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Jadwiga E. Pieper-Mooney, “Re-visiting Histories of Modernization, Progress, and (Unequal) Citizenship Rights: Coerced Sterilization in Peru and in the United States,” *History Compass* 8(9) (2010): 1036–54.

in the scholarship on eugenics. This article will build on this to demonstrate that Chilean objections to coerced sterilization, though motivated by ostensibly humane impulses, did not preclude the belief in the moral and physical “betterment” of individuals that eugenic racial theories supported.

Turda and Gillette’s *Latin Eugenics in Comparative Perspective* (2014) also contended that coerced sterilization was not popular among eugenicists in Europe’s Latin nations. Much like Stepan, they argued that neo-Lamarckism was far more important to the theorization of Latin eugenics than its North American and northern European counterparts. In addition, they argued that Latin eugenicists defined their work specifically in contrast to eugenic practices they identified as in keeping with an “Anglo-Saxon” intellectual tradition, such as coerced sterilization.²⁰ According to Turda and Gillette, Latin eugenicists felt that Anglo-Saxon eugenics operated almost exclusively to reinforce the supposed racial superiority of Anglo-Saxon and Nordic racial groups.²¹ As such, they characterized the development and foundation of the Latin Eugenics Federation in 1933 as a distinct response not only to the 1933 German sterilization law but also to the suggestion that the Latin race was inferior.²² This article supports this claim by demonstrating that Chilean eugenicists, like their Latin European colleagues, became increasingly skeptical of coerced sterilization as the 1930s progressed. Additionally, it highlights how this development was characterized as “Latin” specifically in response to the 1933 German sterilization law.

The literature regarding coerced sterilization in the United States of America is also helpful in contextualizing the Chilean case. Looking at coerced sterilization in the United States of America from the end of the nineteenth century until the 1970s, Mark A. Largent’s *Breeding Contempt* (2008) contended that the practice of coerced sterilization was not necessarily a central theoretical tenet of eugenics or scientific racism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, much like Chilean eugenicists claimed at the time.²³ Instead he argued that coerced sterilization existed alongside the eugenics movement and was only conceptually linked to eugenics, specifically Nazi-style negative eugenics, as part of a larger growth in identity politics in the 1970s.²⁴ Decoupling coerced sterilization from eugenics allows for a better understanding of how the practice began being tested well before the eugenics movement started and persisted long after eugenic science had lost its appeal.

Largent’s monograph is also helpful in contextualizing the influence of the Roman Catholic Church in debates regarding coerced sterilization.²⁵ He argues that the Church’s official position regarding coerced sterilization, and eugenics more generally, was not clear until the release of the papal encyclical *Casti Connubii* in December 1930. Prior to that time, there was no official Catholic position regarding sterilization, coerced or

20. Turda and Gillette, *Latin Eugenics*, p. 1.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 165.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 166, 209.

23. Largent, *Breeding Contempt*, p. 2.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 8. Schoen’s *Choice & Coercion* shows that 75% of the sterilizations that took place in North Carolina happened after 1945, p. 106.

25. Stepan, *The Hour of Eugenics*; Turda and Gillette, *Latin Eugenics*.

otherwise, though most Catholics objected to it on the grounds that it was a form of birth control.²⁶ The encyclical also did not prohibit other forms of eugenic intervention, a distinction that will be discussed below. Largent and, to a much larger extent, Sharon Leon both discuss how U.S. Catholic opinions regarding the perceived relationship between eugenics and racism moved outward from the Catholic community into the larger U.S. populace throughout the 1920s and 1930s.²⁷ It should be noted, however, that these opinions did not stop coerced sterilizations from taking place in the United States for another three decades despite the fact that the ideological tide had supposedly turned against them.²⁸

Finally, the overlapping coherences and contradictions in “Latin” and American eugenics regarding coerced sterilization have been discussed at length in Laura Briggs’s *Reproducing Empire* (2002). This work concurred with the others in terms of noting the 1970s as the moment when coerced sterilization was conceptually linked to eugenics and demonized in the United States.²⁹ What was unique to Briggs’s monograph, however, was how her focus on Puerto Rico encouraged an explicit comparison of mainland, “American” ideas regarding sterilization and insular, “Latin” ones. She deftly showed how various strands of eugenic thought operated in Puerto Rico simultaneously, much as they did in Chile as this article will show. One of the more striking was the belief, among many Puerto Rican nationalists, that birth control efforts (sometimes in the form of sterilization brought to the island by mainland activists) were considered to be genocidal plots organized by the American government.³⁰ Concerns about the asymmetrical power relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States formed the background for the formulation of alternative eugenic concepts there that often supported arguments against coerced sterilization but that did not necessarily disrupt the larger eugenic belief in racial “betterment” or hierarchy.

All of these works suggest that a more nuanced understanding of coerced sterilization sheds light on what constitutes eugenic theory and practice in the early twentieth century, both inside and outside Latin America. For Latin Americans, at least, it seems that coerced sterilization was a specific site in which ideas about the relationship between the Global North and Global South were debated and worked out. In this sense, coerced sterilization offers a unique opportunity to consider what constitutes the Latin world or a uniquely Latin American race science. Because coerced sterilization was conspicuous by its relative absence in Latin American eugenic practice, the scholarly coverage of this issue has mostly been limited to the Veracruz law, subtle efforts on the part of specific physicians, or covert contemporary government efforts to sterilize women from socially marginalized groups.³¹ However, this article points to the rather intense debate Chilean

26. Largent, *Breeding Contempt*, p. 103–5.

27. Leon, *An Image of God*.

28. Stern attributed this phenomenon to the persistence of hereditarianism in U.S. science even after World War II in *Eugenic Nation*. By focusing on hereditarianism, rather than on eugenics per se, she contextualized American coerced sterilization into a longer set of historical developments and intellectual traditions, p. 3.

29. Briggs, *Reproducing Empire*, pp. 143–4, 150.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

31. Briggs, *Reproducing Empire*; Yolanda Eraso, “Biotypology, Endocrinology, and Sterilization: The Practice of Eugenics in the Treatment of Argentinian Women during the 1930s,” *Bulletin*

eugenicists produced regarding a practice they generally disliked from the start. For something that was presumably so beyond the pale, there was a significant amount of discussion about coerced sterilization as a practice. In fact, a more careful look at debates regarding coerced sterilization in Chile suggests that Chilean eugenicists did not see themselves as differing very much from their North American and northern European colleagues until rather late in the eugenics movement. It was not until the German sterilization law of 1933 that a more concerted effort to discredit the practice, which was self-identified as “Latin,” arose in Chile.

Initial indifference: Chilean responses to sterilization as medical practice before 1933

Early discussions of sterilization as eugenic or medical practice in Chile were not necessarily critical. For example, an October 1905 article in the *Revista Médica de Chile* [*Chilean Medical Review*] offered a rather favorable estimation of the practice. The author, identified as the journal’s editor Dr. C. Pérez Canto, considered the use of x-rays for the purpose of sterilization to be quite promising. Clodomiro Pérez Canto (1863–?) began his career as a naturalist, but moved more into medicine over the course of his life. One of his special interests was the use of x-rays as treatment for a variety of medical conditions.³² The first half of the article discussed various experiments on rabbits and rats to test the effects of x-rays on their fertility. Referring to work done by radiological oncologists and physicians such as Hermann Heineke (1872–1922), Charles-Edouard Aubertin (1876–1950), Antoine Béclère (1856–1939), Ludwig Halberstaedter (1876–1949), Jean-Alban Bergonie (1857–1925), Louis Tribondeau (1872–1918), and Frederick Tilden Brown (1855–1910), all included in the article’s bibliography, Pérez seemed enthusiastic about the benefit of this method of sterilization.³³ His obvious and extensive

of the History of Medicine 81(4) (2007): 793–822; Necochea López, *Family Planning in Peru*; Pieper-Mooney, “Re-visiting Histories of Modernization”; Stepan, *The Hour of Eugenics*; Stern, “‘The Hour of Eugenics’ in Veracruz.”

32. Carlos E. Porter, “El Dr. Clodomiro Perez Canto: Notas biográficas y bibliográficas,” *Revista chilena de historia natural pura y aplicada*, 1(6) (1905): 290–3.
33. I have included this list of references to demonstrate that Dr. Pérez was well aware of the most recent developments in radiology in a number of locations and did not seem to have any particular intellectual loyalty to ostensibly Latin scientists over mainstream ones. Dr. C. Perez Canto, “La esterilizacion jénésica por los rayos X,” *Revista médica de Chile* 33(10) (1905): 289–95, 290–2. For biographical information on the experts Perez cites, see: P. Blanquet, B. Hoerni and J. Plessis, “Jean-Alban Bergonié (1857–1925), military physician,” *Histoire des sciences médicales*, 27(22) (1993): 149–54; “Charles-Edouard Aubertin,” last modified 20 December 2016, http://data.bnf.fr/11303823/charles-edouard_aubertin; Maria Dalamaga, MD, PhD and Antonis A. Kousoulis, MD, “Remembering Louis Tribondeau (1872–1918),” *JAMA Dermatology*, 149(8) (2013): 934; Juan A. Del Regato, MD, *Radiological Oncologists: The Unfolding of a Medical Speciality* (Reston VA: Radiology Centennial Inc., 1993) (for Beclere and Heineke); “Frederick Tilden Brown, M.D.,” *The Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* 162(19) (1910): 658; “Ludwig Halberstaedter, M.D.,” *British Medical Journal* 4610(1949): 871.

familiarity with experiments of this type taking place in Europe and North America also suggests that he felt no particular intellectual loyalty or connection to an identifiably “Latin” medical or eugenic tradition.

Pérez’s seeming enthusiasm for the procedure also indicates that he did not fit traditional scholarly notions of a Latin eugenicist. He wrote, “And the effects of such magnitude are obtained easily, without the brutal surgeon’s knife, without the nauseating pharmacist’s potion.”³⁴ Even more important, for him, was that x-ray exposure treatment did not deprive men and women of their ability to engage in sexual intercourse. As he put it, “they do not suspect that they have been stripped of their biblical mission to populate the earth.”³⁵ His use of the term “suspect” should be explained here. It is unclear from this article if Pérez felt that he, as a physician, could sterilize people without their knowledge or consent. He did believe that it was a promising new option, as it might allow men and women who suffered from serious health conditions to avoid pregnancy in the short- or long-term as their health dictated.³⁶ Additionally, in contrast to previous methods which involved castration, the maintenance of sexual function with an x-ray induced sterilization was part of what made coerced sterilization both more palatable and possible as a eugenic practice in this period.³⁷ Even so, Pérez only suggested the possibility of coerced sterilization in the context of individual physicians making “good” decisions for their patients. It is unclear how he might have felt about state-legislated sterilization programs.

His ambivalence was further illustrated by the fact that, even though he thought that x-ray induced sterility offered some valuable options for patients, he also had real concerns about some of the possible drawbacks of the procedure. First and foremost, it was very important to protect the x-ray technicians from becoming sterile themselves.³⁸ This was easily done, according to Pérez, by, “covering the sensitive regions with the appropriate screen.”³⁹ Additionally, Pérez noted that it was unclear what kind of long-term effects x-ray treatments might have on women, as they worked by atrophying the Graafian (or ovarian) follicles in order to prevent regular menstrual cycles. He worried that this might prevent women from having children in the future, considerations of potential side effects that were not unwarranted in a medical journal.⁴⁰ Surprisingly, though, he had no corresponding concern regarding what long-term exposure to x-rays might do to a man’s ability to reproduce. Most likely, this was because Pérez shared the belief of many of his colleagues at the time all over the world that to remove the ability for a woman to have a child was to make the “most profound change in her entire sexual life.”⁴¹

34. Pérez Canto, “La esterilización,” p. 292.

35. *Ibid.*

36. Pérez Canto, “La esterilización,” p. 293.

37. This was also true in the United States and Scandinavia in the same period, see: Gunnar Broberg and Nils Roll-Hansen, *Eugenics and the Welfare State: Sterilization Policy in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1996); Largent, *Breeding Contempt*.

38. *Ibid.*, Pérez Canto, “La esterilización,” p. 293.

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Ibid.*

Though his medical evaluation of x-rays as sterilizing agents seemed relatively favorable, the final page of Pérez's article was much more ambivalent. He feared that the ease and effectiveness of sterilization by x-ray would present a moral dilemma not only to the doctors performing the procedure, but to human society at large. He wrote, "Limiting these observations to the evolution of sexual passions, it is necessary to admit that x-rays have opened up unanticipated pathways to [sexual] satisfaction *without compromise* ranging from the simplest passionate moment to the most hypocritical libertinism."⁴² Leaving aside his ability to turn a phrase, Pérez's concern with the possibility that sterilization, especially one that might only be temporary and could be used as birth control, would lead to increased sexual contact between men and women, speaks to his commitment to traditional relationships organized by patriarchal sexual norms. This approach to sterilization was typical among Chilean eugenicists and physicians at this time who, prior to 1933, based their objections to the practice primarily on the fear that it would pave the way to sexual profligacy on an unprecedented scale.

This mirrored the concerns of some eugenicists in the United States as well. It may come as a surprise that Charles Davenport, for all his support of eugenic intervention into the lives of U.S. citizens, did not believe that sterilizing the unfit was a good idea.⁴³ In fact, much like Chilean eugenicists, he feared that this practice would only encourage the most base of U.S. society to indulge in all their most torrid desires. After a flurry of states passed compulsory sterilization laws starting in 1907, in his 1911 monograph *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics* Davenport wondered if coerced sterilization, while addressing one issue, might create another by encouraging sterilized people to "become a peculiar menace to the community through unrestrained dissemination of venereal disease?"⁴⁴ For him, one of the few brakes to the rampant sexuality of the poor and non-white was the possibility of pregnancy. Removing that barrier was dangerous. Eugenics, after all, was not only about physically improving the human population but also morally improving them. Instead, Davenport advocated a program of physically separating dysgenic individuals from the larger population.⁴⁵

By the 1920s, strictly medical concerns regarding coerced sterilization had matured among Chilean eugenicists. As a result, despite the widespread ambivalence toward the procedure, theses about eugenics and coerced sterilization submitted at the Universidad de Chile in the interwar period came from disciplines as diverse as social work, law, and medicine. An example of the latter was Maria Figueroa P.'s 1924 thesis, "Estudio sobre Eugenesia y Herencia Patológica [Study on Eugenics and Pathological Inheritance]." In order to obtain her bachelor's degree in Medicine and Pharmacy, Figueroa reflected on the various efforts different countries had made in the implementation of eugenic social welfare programs. Much like Pérez, her discussion of eugenic developments reflected a wide-ranging knowledge of intellectual networks and communities as well as no particular allegiance to any one group. For example, when describing the foundation of eugenics societies, Figueroa did not privilege links between Latin countries. She wrote,

42. Ibid, p. 294 (*italics mine*).

43. Largent, *Breeding Contempt*, p. 59. The first compulsory sterilization law to successfully pass in the United States was in 1907 in the state of Indiana. A number of states then followed suit. For extended discussion of this, see Largent.

44. As quoted in Largent, *Breeding Contempt*, p. 60.

45. Ibid.

“other countries have followed the example of the English and U.S. eugenics societies and in France the French Eugenic Society was founded in 1912. Italy followed after with its Italian Committee for the Study of Eugenics, in fact a branch of the Danish Anthropological Committee (1913). Germany and Sweden participated too. Belgium in 1920 received [the call] and enthusiastically participated in the movement. South America has collaborated also; in Argentina the Eugenic Society formed in 1916, Brazil founded another in 1918. Chile, at the Fifth International Conference celebrated in Santiago in 1923, agreed to give the necessary importance to these deserving questions.”⁴⁶

Though Figueroa portrayed the French as exemplary in this passage, she did not claim any particular connection to France’s scientific traditions or a unique Latin affinity. Nor did she separate Anglo and Nordic countries from Latin ones in this list. The only hint of a potentially Latin predisposition in this text was her statement that these endeavors would also include considerations of “the influence of the environment” such as economics, law, and customs in the health and fitness of a given individual.⁴⁷

Building on her belief in environmental intervention, Figueroa insisted that sexual responsibility was a central aspect to eugenic best practices and the easiest means of avoiding the ethical problems presented by coerced sterilization. Though Pérez feared sexual libertinism, it was Figueroa who proposed a solution to this potential danger. She argued that fostering the sexual discipline necessary for eugenic coupling was only possible through “well-directed [sex] education from the start.”⁴⁸ It is unclear if she intended this education for all people or only men, as the passage refers to “man” without clarifying whether this referred to humanity as a whole. Yet it is likely that she meant men, as social commentators of the period in favor of sex education typically contended that it need only be taught to men and boys because they were the only ones likely to engage in “risky,” and therefore dysgenic, sexual practices.⁴⁹

While sex education was popular with eugenicists outside Latin America too, teaching eugenic sexual conduct became even more important in a context in which sterilization of any sort was looked upon with suspicion. Though eugenicists in Latin America, including Figueroa, accepted the notion that “mental defects” were hereditary and wanted to limit the possibilities of this eventuality, they still were reticent about using coerced sterilization as a means to that end. Expressing this concern in no uncertain terms, Figueroa wrote, “The laws of heredity are better understood every day. Of course we cannot copy natural selection slavishly; if we attempted to do so, we would end up committing murders.”⁵⁰ Clearly, if lacking an obvious Latin eugenic theory upon which to call, some Chileans felt that eugenic practices that relied too heavily on hereditarianism

46. Maria Figueroa P., *Estudio sobre Eugenesia y Herencia Patológica* (Santiago de Chile: Imprenta Cervantes, 1924), p. 9.

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

49. Susan Besse, *Restructuring Patriarchy: The Modernization of Gender Inequality in Brazil, 1914–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Sueann Caulfield, *In Defense of Honor: Sexual Morality, Modernity, and Nation in Early-Twentieth Century Brazil* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); Donna Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family, and Nation in Argentina* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991); Stepan, *Hour of Eugenics*, p. 132.

50. Figueroa P., *Eugenesia*, p. 17.

presented ethical problems. While later this would be discussed as a defining feature of Latin eugenic science, prior to 1933 it simply illustrated the variegated landscape of eugenic theory in Latin America.

Chilean objections to coerced sterilization prior to 1933 in particular reflect a more localized set of concerns. Before the German sterilization law, Chilean eugenicists were most concerned about the small size of the national population relative to comparable Latin American neighbors. Some experts at the time attributed the small population to a high incidence of infant mortality.⁵¹ Others argued that it was due to a relatively high mortality rate, often linked to the prevalence of tuberculosis among the lower classes. These discussions always placed Chile into a wider Latin American context that at least nodded to a more regional, Latin American identity. An especially notable example of this can be found in physician Victor Grossi's opening article in a 1932 special issue of the medical journal *Medicina Moderna* [*Modern Medicine*]. The issue was dedicated to the study of the significant amount of tuberculosis in the Aconcagua Valley, about sixty miles north of Santiago in the interior of the Valparaíso Region. The introductory page of the issue compared Chile's population size to that of other Latin American nations. Grossi wrote, "If we take into consideration the enormous progress achieved by Argentina and especially Brazil, countries that do not have as privileged climates [as ours]... we have to arrive at the conclusion that if our country's population does not grow, that [it] is exclusively due to the lack of economic and cultural planning that this progress signifies."⁵² To drive his point home, he included a visual rendering of the population growth of each country over the past sixty years (Figure 1). His choice of populations with which to compare Chile demonstrates that Grossi felt that these countries had some kind of relationship, if only geographic. More important, to his mind, Chile was lagging behind its "less privileged" neighbors. Perhaps that was why he also included Peru in the image. As a country that Chile often considered of lesser import, the fact that its population remained similar in size to that of Chile's was

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51. Scholars like Nara Milanich and Jadwiga Pieper-Mooney both demonstrate how the infant mortality rate was constantly lamented by Chilean social commentators during this period, see: Nara Milanich, "Latin American Childhoods and the Concept of Modernity," in Paula S. Fass (ed.), *The Routledge History of Childhood in the Western World* (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 491–508; Jadwiga E. Pieper-Mooney, *The Politics of Motherhood: Maternity and Women's Rights in Twentieth-Century Chile* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009). It was often used as an indicator of Chile's backwardness in relation to the rest of the civilized world, particularly Latin American countries considered to be Chile's competitors. As one writer put it in 1935, "while Chile languishes with its unchanging number of four million inhabitants, closing in on a state of frank inferiority, Argentina and Brazil have multiplied their populations various times," (Arturo Atria Ramirez, "El problema de la despoblacion," *Estudios* 29 (1935): 15–18, 16).
52. Victor Grossi, "La tuberculosis en Aconcagua," *Medicina Moderna* 6(2–3) (1932): 57–72, 57. Grossi's mention of climates is intriguing here. The notion that climates were intimately connected to the development and intrinsic talents of individual races, often an argument made by those who believed in human polygenism, was one of the most popular theories of French-speaking Swiss biologist Louis Agassiz (1807–1873). While polygenism was not popular among Latin American eugenicists, climate as a part of an individual's general environment remained quite important. See also: Louis Agassiz, *The Diversity of Origin of the Human Races*, *Christian Examiner* (July 1850): 1–36.



Figure 1. Visual rendering of Chile's supposed population stagnation relative to other Latin American nations, Grossi, "La tuberculosis en Aconcagua," *Medicina Moderna* (1932), Photo taken by author, material housed at the Biblioteca Nacional de Chile.

possibly meant to shame Chileans into action. Written just before the 1933 German sterilization law, this focus on Chile's environmental obstacles to progress and better health as part of a wider Latin American world presaged more explicit references to a unified Latin American eugenic theory and practice that would arise soon after.

Latinizing objections: Chilean rejection of coerced sterilization after 1933

Until the early 1930s, the majority of Chilean eugenicists were cautious about sterilization as an optional medical treatment for the reasons discussed in the previous section. However, the articles they wrote in popular periodicals and medical journals after the passage of Germany's race laws in July 1933 took a much stronger position against the practice. Unlike the somewhat ambivalent responses to strict biological determinism and hereditarianism in eugenic theory emanating from North America and northern Europe prior to this time, Chilean eugenicists began to emphasize how important the environment was to human development and how humans were able to shape their own environments through culture and civilization. They insisted that human beings, though part of the natural world and even animals themselves, should not be treated as if they were livestock. An author identified only as "J.L.C." wrote the following in a 1934 issue of *La Revista Católica* [*The Catholic Magazine*]:

"There is the famous Mendelian law of heredity of which modern biologists have made a great show, but this law of heredity is for the animal kingdom; *for man, the dispositions of heredity do not always follow a uniform path, but rather are comprised of so many exceptions and combinations making the notion of a law illusory*, because of this one cannot simply substitute the vulgar denomination of 'good or bad.'"⁵³

According to this writer, the ability to control the environment, and be affected by it, distinguished human beings from all other types of natural life on Earth. Most Latin American eugenicists did accept that natural selection occurred for all living organisms. Yet they refused to accept that human reproduction was commensurate to that of animals, in contrast to many U.S. eugenicists who often concretely connected animal breeding to human eugenics.⁵⁴

The timing of this renewed rejection of biological determinism and its conceptual linkage to coerced sterilization among Chilean eugenicists is suggestive. Although coerced sterilization laws had been on the books in the United States since 1907, it was not until the German sterilization law that Chilean critics began a more concentrated denunciation of the practice.⁵⁵ Appearing in the July 1934 issue of the *Revista Médica de Chile* [*Chilean Medical Review*], physician and public health advocate Waldemar E. Coutts wrote about his concerns related to coerced sterilization. Coutts represented the upper echelons of the Chilean medical community in the early twentieth century. Born in

53. J.L.C., "La eugenesia moderna," *La Revista Católica* 761 (1934): 76–80, 79 (italics mine).

54. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*; Paul A. Lombardo, *A Century of Eugenics in America: From the Indiana Experiment to the Human Genome Era* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); Stern, *Eugenic Nation*.

55. Largent, p. 65.

December 1895 in Viña del Mar, an affluent beach community about seventy-five miles west of Santiago, he studied both in Scotland and Chile and, in 1918, he graduated from the Universidad de Chile's medical school with a degree in surgery with specialties in urology and venereal disease. He founded the Sociedad de Urología [Society of Urology] and its corresponding periodical. In recognition of his reputation in the medical community, he was named director and chief physician of the Department of Social Hygiene in 1925 and remained an influential government functionary, including serving as Minister of Health (1952–3), until his death in 1959.⁵⁶

In his 1934 article, entitled “El problema de la esterilización desde el punto de vista bio-social [The Problem of Sterilization from the Bio-Social Point of View],” Coutts took exception to the practice of coerced sterilization because he felt it was too much informed by a biologically-determined hereditarian model of human evolution. He argued that people were more than the sum of their physical parts. Unlike animals and plants who reproduced “freely,” the advancement of human civilization and culture, as well as human self-awareness, had drastically changed the environment in which human beings lived and reproduced.⁵⁷ In his own words, “This environment should not be reduced to the strictly material, but rather it can be found imbued into the cultural and spiritual values, which allow man to adapt from childhood to the conditions imposed by civilization.”⁵⁸

His expertise in both urology and venereal disease probably helps to explain his interest in coerced sterilization from a medical perspective, as it might affect similar parts of the body. However, his objections to the practice went well beyond the potential physical complications. Coutts wrote, “we cannot accept that the individual depends exclusively on heredity, if that were true, we would have to accept the existence of superior men, castes or races.”⁵⁹ This comment might seem surprising coming from a eugenicist such as Coutts. Presumably, one of the foundations of eugenic theory was the belief that there were indeed superior and inferior types of humans. The origin story of the term and the discipline itself perpetuates the idea that eugenics was primarily about the study and cultivation of “good genes.”⁶⁰ Yet Coutts's insistence on the unity of the human race speaks to what might constitute one of the fundamental differences between mainstream and Latin eugenics. In his view, the practice of eugenics was about improving the human race through environmental interventions. In particular, the Chilean race needed eugenics to bring it from the brink of extinction caused by what Coutts identified as cultural

56. Ema Acevedo Fagalde, Armando de Ramon and Patricio Valdivieso, *Biografías de chilenos*, Vol. 1 (Santiago: Ediciones Universidad Católica de Chile, 1999), p. 307.

57. Waldemar E. Coutts, “El problema de la esterilización desde el punto de vista bio-social,” *Revista Médica de Chile* 7 (1934): 391–405, 397–8.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 392.

59. *Ibid.*

60. Histories of eugenics all point to the discipline's founder, Francis Galton, as the origin of the notion of good and bad genes. Though most of Galton's work dealt with identifying how good traits were passed within families, the term “eugenics” was not coined by the British anthropologist until 1883. See: Francis Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculties and Their Development* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1883).

factors: alcoholism, syphilis, and infant mortality.⁶¹ The issue, to his mind, was not an innate or insuperable Chilean racial degeneracy but rather a lack of resources to combat public health and hygiene problems that threatened all Chileans.

Coutts also objected to coerced sterilization because he believed that humanity was united by its need for sexual expression and reproduction. Presaging later objections to birth control and coerced sterilization programs aimed at women across the Global South, he felt that every person ought to be free to exercise reproductive self-determination. He argued, "In free nature, every being, upon reaching sexual maturity biologically, has the right to reproduce according to their sexual constitution."⁶² This comment is interesting because Coutts also stipulated that most human beings did not live in so-called free nature. As the previous quote demonstrated, culture had moved humans out of this free zone. But Coutts claimed that human sexuality functioned outside the purview of civilized life and therefore was not to be regulated by human institutions. In some ways, it was the only remaining link to humanity's animal past.⁶³ As such, he used the universality of the reproductive impulse as proof of the biological unity of humanity and the folly of eugenic theories premised upon maintaining racial purity.⁶⁴

Surprisingly, Catholic intellectuals and physicians in Chile also favored a version of sexual self-determination inspired by their objections to coerced sterilization. In the August 1935 edition of *Estudios*, contributor Carlos Hamilton Depassier (1908–1988) wrote a scathing indictment of coerced sterilization as a eugenic tool.⁶⁵ Specifically, he argued that there was very little scientific proof that coerced sterilization actually resulted in the eugenic improvement of a population. The article, entitled "El problema de la esterilización eugénica [The Problem of Eugenic Sterilization]," argued that, "The proportion of attacks [on coerced sterilization] in the name of humanity and science were not less than those made in the name of religion and morality."⁶⁶ Hamilton was not incorrect in that estimation. As the previous example demonstrates, there was substantial scientific and medical debate among physicians and eugenicists as to whether or not coerced sterilization would actually achieve better results than a less intrusive program of public health initiatives.

The difference between a Latin and mainstream approach to coerced sterilization probably has more to do with timing. In the United States and northern Europe, the 1930s represented a peak in state-sanctioned sterilizations.⁶⁷ In the Latin world, however, this period saw an increased insistence on the unnecessary cruelty and

61. Coutts, "Esterilización de punto de vista bio-social," pp. 393–5.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 396.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 397.

64. It should be noted that Coutts did think that sterilization should be available as a birth control option. However, this was a choice an individual alone should make, free from coercion and state intervention.

65. Enrico Pattaro and Corrado Roversi (eds.), *Legal Philosophy in the Twentieth Century: The Civil Law World, Tome 2: Main Orientations and Topics*, Vol. XII of *A Treatise of Legal Philosophy and General Jurisprudence* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2016), p. 175.

66. Carlos Hamilton, "El problema de la esterilización eugénica," *Estudios* 33 (1935): 22–34, 22.

67. Largent, *Breeding Contempt*; Schoen, *Choice & Coercion*; Stern, *Eugenic Nation*.

questionable effectiveness of the practice. In fact, objections to coerced sterilization became so vociferous and widespread that eugenicists in Latin America and southern Europe began to claim that acceptance of this premise was an identifying feature of a “Latin” eugenic theory and practice. To support their claims, some Chilean eugenicists heavily relied on the writings of Catholic theologians and intellectuals.⁶⁸ Hamilton’s article quoted at length from the papal encyclical *Casti Connubii*. This encyclical, published in December 1930, was the first text to officially document a Catholic stance against coerced sterilization. Regarding other types of eugenic practices, Hamilton wrote, “It is evident that the [encyclical] does not condemn improvement of the race in itself, but rather the immoral methods that some propose as necessary.”⁶⁹ The distinction between coerced sterilization and eugenics is critical. Hamilton argued that the encyclical did not prevent the dissemination of information regarding improving an individual’s health and wellbeing, which would ultimately benefit the race much more than preventing supposedly unfit individuals from procreating. The main Catholic objection to the practice of coerced sterilization, according to Hamilton, was that these measures would interfere with an individual’s right to have children within the institution of marriage. Intriguingly, with this insistence on rights and self-determination, the Catholic reaction to coerced sterilization began to outline what feminist and progressive intellectuals would argue about reproductive rights for women in the developing world decades later. It should also be noted that objections to coerced sterilization, Catholic or otherwise, did not disrupt the notion that populations could be ‘improved’ both morally and physically.

However, Hamilton’s objections to coerced sterilization also specifically named racism as one of the primary faults of eugenic efforts occurring outside the so-called Latin world. In the closing pages of his article, he described the German sterilization law as racist, but the racism that he described is not what a contemporary reader might expect.⁷⁰ He wrote that, “The ‘racist’ state has for its supreme goal the exultation of the race over all other things.”⁷¹ In other words, Hamilton’s definition of racism was not so much about having negative views of different or marginalized racial groups. Rather, it was about becoming obsessed with perfecting the race at the national level to such a degree that politics and legislation became ethically bankrupt. To conclude, like many before him, he argued that coerced sterilization would not really solve the moral issues that caused most of society’s troubles. In fact, it would only encourage increased prostitution and libertinism.⁷²

Though more and more Chilean eugenicists came to reject coerced sterilization, there were some who advocated its use. One example was university student Ernesto Hechenleitner Trautmann.⁷³ In order to receive his bachelor’s degree in Law and Political

68. This fits with what Turda and Gillette argue about Latin identity being founded in part on a common history of Catholic religious and cultural practice, *Latin Eugenics*, p. 1.

69. Hamilton, “Esterilización eugénica,” p. 27.

70. *Ibid*, p. 32.

71. *Ibid*, p. 33.

72. *Ibid*, p. 34.

73. Another example of a pro-coerced sterilization position in Chile was Raquel Cousiño de Vicencio’s “Eugenesia, control de natalidad y esterilización,” *Servicio Social* 1–2 (1941): 83–7.

Science from the Universidad de Chile, Hechenleitner wrote a thesis in 1936 lionizing the German law with an eye to its application in Chile. He translated the text from its original German to Spanish himself and included it in his thesis. His surname and familiarity with German suggest that Hechenleitner's family was of German descent, which might account for his positive view of the law.⁷⁴ In response to the argument that coerced sterilization would only encourage sexual impropriety among individuals with already questionable morals, Hechenleitner wrote the following, "it is preferable to allow a well understood libertinism, that in fact already exists, in exchange for a judicious selection of individuals whose fruits would guarantee the increased perfection of the human lineage."⁷⁵ Yet, it is clear that he anticipated some push back from his readership and thesis examiners, suggesting the growing support for Latin eugenics among Chilean intellectuals. To his colleagues at the Universidad de Chile's Faculty of Law and Political Science who might dislike this approach, he contended that coerced sterilization, "[would be] a preventative measure with an efficient and transitory character because, with the passage of time, the number of individuals requiring its application will diminish."⁷⁶

In an effort to portray coerced sterilization in a better light, Hechenleitner distinguished between it as a medical procedure overseen by experts and a method of birth control used by sexually irresponsible women. Playing on the fears that sterilization of any kind would result in improper sexual behavior, he railed against those who would use the procedure for their own ends. "The lack of maternal instinct in many, entirely healthy, women who, through ego or caprice, rebel against the laws of nature should be the object of the most severe criticisms; renouncing, through the use of [voluntary] sterilization, the most sacred mission with which life entrusts them."⁷⁷ Women seeking out sterilizations voluntarily in an effort to manage their reproductive health, which some eugenicists saw as responsible behavior, was here treated as morally suspect. Turning previous arguments in favor of sexual self-determination on their head, Hechenleitner argued that sterilization was only appropriate when experts decided who should undergo the procedure. In other words, for him, sterilization was only appropriate when it was prescribed (or coerced) by doctors or state officials.

It seems that his examiners were not persuaded. While most of the theses published by the Universidad de Chile's press in this period contained only the student's writing, Hechenleitner's thesis was published with the examiners' comments. This was unusual in itself, but the examiners' low opinion of the thesis is also evocative. Perhaps these

74. There was a small, but significant, group of Nazis who fled to Chile in the wake of World War II. This was, in part, probably due to the fact that there was a local Nazi Party and a tradition of German immigration to Chile since at least the 1870s. For more detailed discussion, see: Marjorie Agosin (ed.), *Memory, Oblivion, and Jewish Culture in Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005); Maria Soledad de la Cerda, *Chile y los hombres del Tercer Reich* (Santiago: Editorial Sudamericana, 2000); Víctor Fariás, *Die Nazis In Chile* (Berlin: Philo, 2002); Graeme S. Mount, *Chile and the Nazis: From Hitler to Pinochet* (New York: Black Rose Books, 2002).

75. Ernesto Hechenleitner Trautmann, *Herencia morbosa y su correctivo eugenésico: "La esterilización"* (Santiago: Imprensa Periodística "El Imparcial," 1936), p. 54.

76. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

77. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

negative comments were included in an effort to show that the faculty, and by extension the university, wanted to distance itself from the positive claims Hechenleitner made about coerced sterilization. Regardless of whether or not the examiners considered him a part of their professional community, or considered coerced sterilization beyond the pale of Latin eugenics, they left no doubt that the thesis was poorly executed.

The first examiner, professor in Legal Medicine at the Universidad de Chile Alfonso García Gerkens, was relatively reserved in his evaluation of Hechenleitner's work.⁷⁸ He stated that the first and second parts of Hechenleitner's thesis, which had to do with how human inheritance worked from a biological perspective and how that inheritance should be considered in legal terms, were poorly executed and did not reflect the depth required of such important issues.⁷⁹ In the third part, which focused on coerced sterilization specifically, García wrote, "the author has developed his personal point of view on the heavily discussed issue of sterilization, giving reasons that he believes justify [it]."⁸⁰ It is not entirely clear whether or not García himself approved of coerced sterilization. However, it is apparent that he did not feel that Hechenleitner had done a thorough enough job when considering such a contentious issue. Nonetheless, García still considered the thesis passable. In his closing paragraph he wrote, "In the end, lord dean, the thesis constitutes an interesting contribution for better understanding the German Sterilization law in effect since 1 January 1934."⁸¹

The second examiner was even more troubled by Hechenleitner's thesis. Gustavo Labatut Glena, director of the Seminary of Penal Law and Legal Medicine at the Universidad de Chile, highly disapproved of almost every aspect of the thesis.⁸² However, it is unclear if this was because of the subject matter or because Labatut felt that Hechenleitner handled the material so poorly. Labatut noted that the bulk of the thesis, presumably parts one and two about human biology, appeared to be nothing more than a pastiche of notes Hechenleitner took while attending lectures given by esteemed university lecturers and physicians Giovanni (Juan) Noé Crevani (1877–1947) and Roberto Barahona Silva (1908–1982).⁸³ Labatut then went on to say that there was a series of

78. Anonymous, "Fallecimiento de dos Profesores de la Escuela de Derecho de Santiago, señores Alfonso García Gerkens y Enrique Rodríguez Mac-Iver," *Anales de la Facultad de Derecho* 7 (25–28) (1941), see: http://web.uchile.cl/vignette/analesderecho/CDA/an_der_articulo/0,1361,SCID%253D1824%2526ISID%253D138,00.html.

79. Alfonso García Gerkens, "Informe sobre la Memoria: 'Herencia Morbosa y su correctivo eugenésico: la esterilización' de don Ernesto Hechenleitner" in *Herencia morbosa y su correctivo eugenésico: "La esterilización"* (Santiago: Imprensa Periodística "El Imparcial," 1936): 3–4, 3.

80. Ibid.

81. Ibid, p. 4.

82. Mauricio Andrés Espinoza Herbias, *Gustavo Labatut Glena: Vida, obra y aporte al derecho penal actual* (Thesis: Universidad de Talca, 2005).

83. Gustavo Labatut G., Letter dated June 20, 1936 in *Herencia morbosa y su correctivo eugenésico: "La esterilización"* (Santiago: Imprensa Periodística "El Imparcial," 1936), pp. 5–6, 5. Benedicto Chuaqui Jahiatt, "Homenaje al profesor Roberto Barahona Silva," *Revista Médica de Chile* 111 (1983): 743–6; Ministerio de Salud, "Biografía de Dr. Juan Noe Crevani," <http://www.bibliotecaminsal.cl/wp/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Biografia-Dr-Juan-Noe.pdf>.

fairly concerning errors throughout the entire work.⁸⁴ In his own words, “Unfortunately, the author does not elucidate with the amplitude that they deserve [the scientific problems of coerced sterilization]. Allowing him to carry on with his exaggerated eagerness for brevity, he has reduced the fruits of his research to the minimum, barely sketching the many important issues.”⁸⁵ For all his displeasure, though, Labatut deferred to the dean as to whether or not Hechenleitner’s thesis should pass. The reactions of these reviewers, and the publication of their comments, suggest that in 1934 the Chilean eugenics movement was becoming more trepidatious about coerced sterilization while still willing to accept some discussion of the procedure as potentially beneficial. But this would not last.

Over the course of the 1930s and 1940s too much enthusiasm for coerced sterilization as eugenic practice increasingly seemed to be discursively associated with Nazi atrocities among eugenicists in Chile. Rather than point to similar laws passed in the United States and the United Kingdom, Chilean eugenicists seemed to focus on Germany as the heart of hereditarian eugenic models. Miguel Arezzi’s 1940 *Estudios* article, which opened this essay, illustrates this very well. Arezzi argued that, “The eugenic attempts of the modern Germans that they hope will result in ‘pure blood’ is, practically speaking, a vain effort.”⁸⁶ Again, this was because he believed that sterilizing the worst elements of society would result in the loss of sexual morality. Worse, coerced sterilization did not really address the most important issue. According to Arezzi, while a sterilized individual may no longer produce offspring of their own, the psychological predisposition toward delinquency was not curbed. Therefore, the social problems that coerced sterilization proposed to correct would not actually be resolved.⁸⁷

Arezzi also alluded to the type of racism Hamilton addressed four years earlier. He argued that the German sterilization law, while theoretically sound in some ways, was more about a political project to encourage the growth of German nationalism.

“This law, that could be more explicitly defined as ‘coerced sterilization’, has a eugenic end, and it should not be confused with the other political and social arrangements that attempt to maintain the Germanic race’s ‘purity’, better said, the various races that make up the German people and who have been grouped under the incorrect category of ‘Aryan race’. It is not that the law in question does not consider the purity of the ‘race’, but in this case the word ‘race’ does not have any ethnic significance and, to avoid confusion, with the racist issue that mobilizes Germany.”⁸⁸

Though the race-based nationalism that Arezzi mentions was not what the word “racism” would come to mean only a few years later, Chilean eugenicists’ concerns about overly enthusiastic race appreciation are notable. While they had no problem with discussing the merits of various races, and working to improve the health of their racialized national population, Chilean eugenicists clearly felt that the kind of racism Germans practiced was disturbing. A racialized nationalism based on the supposed racial purity of a given

84. Labatut G., “Letter,” p. 6.

85. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

86. Arezzi, “Esterilización eugenésica,” p. 16.

87. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

88. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

nation was especially cause for concern. This type of race thinking also supported the idea that Latin Americans, almost all of whom were racially mixed in some way, were lesser than other peoples.

The turn against coerced sterilization among Chilean eugenicists during the 1930s formed part of a larger Latin American awareness that race, despite its supposed scientific irrelevance, had become central to political relationships between their nations and the world at large. An article appearing in *Estudios* in 1947 entitled “Selección mas o menos natural [A Somewhat Natural Selection],” illustrated that awareness:

“One of the inadmissible aspects of Hitlerism was that cult of pseudo-betterment of man through anthropotechnic measures and interventions in the intimate liberty and integrity of physical nature. But now we see that scientists of the victorious [nations] are starting to worry intensely about the possibly ‘better world’ and accept, under other colors, of course, the principles that yesterday would make them shed tears of indignation.”⁸⁹

Implying that cultural modernization efforts led by white-majority nations like the United States still supported the idea that some people were more superior, this quote indicates that at least some in Chile saw a direct link between the racially-motivated negative eugenic measures of the early twentieth century and the supposedly more humane, anti-racist postwar period. Perhaps that should not be surprising. Latin Americans had already experienced decades of eugenic rhetoric that labeled their nations, peoples, and races as lesser, degenerate, or hopelessly mixed. Arguing against coerced sterilization became one of the ways to fight against those narratives. Unfortunately, though the guise of science had been lifted when it came to race, Latin Americans had still not freed themselves of the need for “betterment” relative to more developed nations in North America and northern Europe.

Chilean objections to coerced sterilization in the 1930s were only a part of a much more diverse landscape of what might be considered Latin eugenics, but they illustrate the conflicting threads at work in race science in Latin America in the twentieth century. On the one hand, objections to the practice were made based on notions of the universality of the human species and an insistence on sexual self-realization. On the other, the idea that undesirable individuals could be limited in their ability to affect society through education or persuasion remained a powerfully seductive myth to many Latin American eugenicists. The development of Latin American racial thought shows how certain racial groups can construct and maintain their privilege while simultaneously condemning racial prejudice and discrimination on a larger scale. Better understanding these tensions helps to contextualize the longevity of coerced sterilization, cultural improvement programs, and the scientific importance of “populations” even as race supposedly ceased being a meaningful scientific category in the wake of World War II.

Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this article was given at the annual meeting of the History of Science Society in 2015. I would like to thank my co-editor, Sebastián Gil-Riaño, for all the support in

89. Anonymous, “Selección mas o menos natural,” *Estudios* 168 (1947): 64–5, 64.

getting this special issue off the ground and giving feedback on early versions of this article. I would also like to thank the other contributors as well as Gabriela Soto Laveaga for their work. Comments from the peer reviewers were also very helpful in focusing this article. Finally, Warwick Anderson gave insightful feedback on an earlier version.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Research for this article was supported by the Australian Research Council Laureate Fellowship Project “Race and Ethnicity in the Global South” and the National Science Foundation’s Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement Grant. I have also received support from the European Research Council Project “The Colour of Labour: Racialized Lives of Migrants” AdG 2015 - 695573, PI: Cristiana Bastos.

Author biography

Sarah Walsh received her PhD in Latin American history from the University of Maryland, College Park. She is currently a Research Fellow at the Instituto de Ciências Sociais at the Universidade de Lisboa. Her areas of expertise include: the history of the human and social sciences in Latin America, gender in Latin America, and race and ethnicity throughout the Global South.