The difficulties in the mapping of hereditary transmission of physical as well as moral traits in humans were a concern to many pioneers in the study of evolution, including eugenicists such as Galton. Confronting information obtained through the investigation of remote, (supposedly) homogeneous populations, on the one hand, and cases of “racial intermixing”, on the other, was widely seen as the only means to palliate the lack of observational and experimental knowledge of the kind accumulated by botanists, animal breeders, and later geneticists, over the time. The whole issue gained special political prominence in Italy in the aftermath of its unification in the midst of a heated public debate over the alleged physical and moral inferiority of the population living in the southern part of the country. From the 1890s onwards, Italian anthropologists, statisticians and, much later, human geneticists expended great efforts to shed light on the vexing question of the relative part played by heredity and environment in the evolution of human populations. After studying secluded people living in remote parts of the peninsula (Sardinia above all), some of these scholars extended their investigations to foreign countries (such as Mexico, Poland, Libya, Southern Africa…) to research both “human isolates” and instances of “racial hybridisation”. Interestingly enough, this tradition of study did not stop at the end of the Second World War, but was carried on by some anthropologists and geneticists well into the 1970s.

Exploring the history of population sciences in Italy from the late 19th C. to the 1970s provides crucial insights on a scientific-national tradition that proved influential in a vast “Latin” cultural area (that spanned from Romania to Mexico, to Argentina, to Brazil, and beyond), while remaining somewhat marginal within the broader international debate on evolution and heredity.