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## REVIEW

### **Brave new world: Eugenics, discipline formation, and the biosocial.**

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Political Biology: Science and Social Values in Human Heredity from Eugenics to Epigenetics, Maurizio Meloni, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp.284, £68.00

#### **Review**

If Donald Trump was Time Magazine's person of 2016, and 'post-truth' was Oxford Dictionaries' word of the same year, then what might be Science and Technology Studies' (STS) concept of the year be? 'Biosocial', a term which denotes the fundamental inseparability, or entanglement, of the social or cultural realm with the biological or natural realm, is surely worthy of a nomination. For STS scholars, the biosocial – perhaps most often represented through a discussion of epigenetics - has been omnipresent in 2016, underpinning special editions of core sociology (Meloni et al. 2016) and cultural theory (Blackman 2016) journals and high profile pronouncements about the need for novel forms of biopolitical resistance (Malabou 2016). Furthermore, and like Donald Trump, support of the biosocial within the social sciences and humanities has been divisive, met in some quarters with a distinctly fierce form of criticism (Gillies et al. 2016).

All of which begs the question: What is it about the biosocial which so captures the interest? In answering this question, I think we can identify at least three areas: These might relate to one another and yet, for rough and ready analytic purposes, can be demarcated easily enough. First, there is a question of novelty: To what extent is scientific research which collapses nature and nurture and brings the biological and the sociological into conversation with one another new? Second, and related, there is an issue of social policy (Featherstone et al. 2014): Does a biosocial focus upon prenatal and early environment necessarily facilitate gendered forms of state intervention into, for example, child rearing practices (Lappé 2016). Finally, and within the academy, what might the coming together of the biological and the social mean for disciplinary formations (Fitzgerald & Callard 2015) and social theory (Warin et al. 2016)? Here, biosocial discussion fits within a broader 'turn to ontology' (Woolgar & Lezaun 2013) or 'new materialism' which questions and incorporates both matter and discourse (Barad 2007). Amongst social science disciplines this debate arguably holds particular significance for STS as it resonates with long standing disputes within the field: Biosocial science, we might suggest, represents a decisive opportunity to finally throw the discursive baby out with the Bath School (Callon & Latour 1992).

Maurizio Meloni's new book Political Biology can be applied to all of the above areas, engaging in a sustained reading of the history of biology and its entwinement with political

practice and eugenic policies. This history is read, to a significant degree, as a history of the present which allows insight into the contemporary biosocial sciences, their possible political fallout, and the future of (inter)disciplinary research. The sum is an accessible and lively introduction to the topics at hand which also offers some provocative hypotheses to guide future research endeavours.

Undergirding Meloni's position are two assertions. The first is that the history of biological thought is intimately connected to political practice. Meloni's argument here is nuanced: In the field of eugenics Meloni sees a co-produced, but non-deterministic relationship between biology and politics. Meloni calls this co-produced field 'political biology' and states that it:

'...holds that in biology no major theory (e.g. heredity, human nature, nature versus nurture) was ever elaborated without implicit or explicit reference to political factors, and, once elaborated, every scientific position becomes a force affecting morality and politics, often in contradictory and ambivalent ways.' (p.15)

Second, within the field of political biology, Meloni notes a series of stark, sharp epistemic breaks since 1800 (p.27). The first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was marked by political individualism and a biological vision where the social was embedded within the biological – a 'soft hereditarian' perspective where nurture affects nature and vice versa. The period between 1860 and World War Two saw a shift to a hard hereditarian perspective – the belief that 'the nature of the seed always prevails over the nurture of the soil,' as Meloni restates (p.43) - combined with a political drive towards social engineering; it was in this space that various forms of eugenics flourished within political diverse settings. A hard hereditarian perspective remained in the latter half of the twentieth century but dreams of directing utopia via eugenic policies passed in the wake of Nazi atrocities. Finally, our current post-genomic moment sees a burgeoning return to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century – a 'porous view of the biological body' (p.ix) which once again collapses nature into nurture: The policy consequences of this latest shift, we are reminded, are yet to be fully determined.

Despite Meloni's claim that these conclusions have been reached on the basis of a new epistemological framework ('political epistemology'), arrived at via a synthesis of STS, biopolitics, and Foucauldian scholarship (p.6), it is the latter – and particularly *The Order of Things* – to which debt is owed; Meloni's 'archeological mission to excavate and problematize sources of the present' (p.ix) involves a dig site with a more than surface level resemblance to Foucault's own. This is not to say that *Political Biology* does not deviate from *The Order of Things*. Meloni softens Foucault's stance on individual agency, permitting particular scientists to maintain positions as 'musketeers' (p.59) or 'anomalies' (p.130) within a broader structure. Further, and despite claims to the contrary, the connections and ruptures which concern Meloni lie close to the surface: *Political Biology* relies on the published work of huge names and makes sustained use of an extensive secondary literature which has covered similar terrain to his own.

And yet the above should not be taken simply as critique: If we put aside some of the more bombastic claims to novelty we are left with an accessible introduction which, assuming a release in paperback with a sensible price tag, will serve a wide audience. The text offers a timely and important reminder that eugenics in the early twentieth century was neither a pseudoscience, nor restricted to a particular form of biological theorising, nor only practiced by the Nazis. Instead, eugenic policy was advocated by both soft and hard hereditarians and practiced in states of all political persuasions: It was a general 'ethos' rather than any particular position which lead to eugenic policies taking the form and shape that they did in

the first half of the twentieth century. This history is important and gives Meloni's worry about the possibility of racist policies resulting from epigenetic research (p.222) particular purchase. It is a shame, when considering recent decades, that Meloni does not draw on the extensive literature in both medical sociology and disability studies (e.g. Shakespeare 1995; Thomas & Rothman 2016) which have similarly considered the coming together of biological and political systems of thought in this field. Nonetheless, the book remains an important resource of value to students and scholars alike.

If the above analysis concerns the social and political stakes of biosocial science, it is when turning to the academic stakes that Meloni is perhaps most provocative. Meloni states that the concept of hard heredity, which as discussed emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, had profound effects from academic research:

'[H]ard heredity, by creating a strict division of inside and outside, also created intellectual boundaries. On the one hand, it relegated the environment – the social – to an ancillary role in biology. On the other, biological marginalization was nurture's fortune: freed from the biological laws of heredity, nurture becomes a non-biological terrain, open to the exclusive observations of social science.' (p.58)

What appears to be being offered here is a concept driven history of discipline formation: once a particular dichotomy emerged (nature-nurture), disciplinary endeavours which targeted one side of the dichotomy, to the exclusion of the other, followed in its wake. This may be a crude reading but it gets at the essential point and would suggest that the existence of a biosocial science may well lead to the (inevitable?) collapse of the social and the biological sciences as distinct entities.

Unfortunately, this analysis is never given quite the sustained attention I hoped for, and I look forward to Meloni returning to this claim and investigating it further in future work. For the moment, I am weary about the suggestion that 'intellectual boundaries' are passively 'created' by concepts (p.58). This is so not only because of a long history of STS discussing the topic of boundary creation and maintenance (Gieryn 1983) but because we know that Durkheim was active and purposive in determining what did and did not count as 'social' (Ramsden & Wilson 2014: 204) and that the act of demarcating the border between social psychology and sociology was itself important in determining what 'the social' these disciplines forged actually looked like (Greenwood 2004). Indeed, a consideration of psychology greatly complicates many of Political Biology's core claims: Psychology is a discipline where, post WW2, biosocial science was flourishing (Ramsden 2011) and key thinkers like B.F. Skinner were producing utopian novels – both trends Meloni insists were typical of biology in the early twentieth century instead occurring when epistemic shifts suggest that the activities should have been largely unthinkable.

Political Biology, then, offers answers to the three core questions of biosociality for social scientists: Novelty? Yes, albeit similar perspectives were found in the nineteenth century. Policy? Probably, but in ways which cannot necessarily be foreseen. Disciplinary? Almost certainly. Provocative claims for sure and, for reasons outlined above, I am doubtful whether they will win over many declared sceptics. 2016 may well have been the year of the biosocial but, like the post-truth politics of Donald Trump, it remains to be seen if we are witnessing an over-analysed flash in the pan, or the dawning of an unpredictable new epoch.

**Bio**

Greg Hollin is a lecturer in social theory at The University of Leeds and has written on various topics related to the sociology of science and medicine with particular concern paid to both the psychology of autism and animal experimentation. Greg's research has been published in *Nature Climate Change*, *Theory, Culture and Society*, *Science as Culture*, and elsewhere.

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