

DUNCAN WILSON, *Tissue Culture in Science and Society: The Public Life of a Biological Technique in Twentieth Century Britain*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Pp. x+182. ISBN 978-0-230-28427-2. £50.00 (hardback).
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Interest has been growing in the history of tissue and organ culture as experimental systems that have produced objects with contested public lives. Existing accounts, notably Hannah Landecker's *Culturing Life* (2007), have focused on the United States, exploring the making of techniques and practices as well as their life beyond the laboratory; Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2010), a gripping biography of HeLa, the human cell line derived from a woman's cervical tumour without her explicit consent, became a major non-fiction bestseller. Duncan Wilson's *Tissue Culture in Science and Society* is a welcome addition, not only because it tells the history of tissue culture in Britain, but also because it emphasizes the trajectories that propelled the technique through a variety of public arenas. From newspapers to science fiction to the courtroom, Wilson explores diverse receptions of life *in vitro* in the twentieth century.

Cultured cells have been at the centre of several controversies in recent years, and this book responds to the debates surrounding stem cells, hybrid embryos and biobanks. Wilson sets out to undermine the assumption, implicit in the works of some sociologists, bioethicists and historians, that these have been matters of long and historically continuous conflict between scientific and social interests. By contrast, he shows convincingly that 'popular attitudes towards tissue culture were enormously varied and changed substantially over the twentieth century' as 'they reflected broader cultural concerns' (pp. 2–3). Throughout the book, Wilson shows that the boundaries between the 'scientific' and the 'public' have been permeable, and were repeatedly traversed.

As the title implies, the research and its lay interpretations are treated in parallel. The first third of the book focuses on the Strangeways Research Laboratory in Cambridge, the oldest centre for tissue culture in Britain. Wilson addresses the appropriations of the scientists' work by diverse media that placed them within debates over mass production, birth control and eugenics. Chapter 3, 'Could you *love* a chemical baby?', shows Wilson at his strongest, as he analyses discussions about organ and embryo cultures among diverse audiences, and shows another genealogy of the 'test-tube baby', a notion central to the debates that followed the birth of Louise Brown after a successful IVF procedure in 1978. Here, Wilson traces most clearly the connections between the scientists at Strangeways and the press, illuminating the two-way exchanges between them. Thus we see the role of the researchers in constructing and contributing to the sensationalist coverage, and learn that some junior scientists supplemented their income by writing popular articles. As Wilson puts it, 'public images often arise thanks to scientific practices and claims, and can interact with and shape science itself' (p. 53).

Wilson goes on to discuss the species politics of cultured cells, and the retrieval of samples from humans, to show a shift towards a widespread use of human tissues after the Second World War. From his analysis of newspaper coverage it is clear that the issues of consent and ownership of tissue culture that have been so important recently were not at stake at mid-century. This work was almost universally hailed as an unproblematic breakthrough that could eliminate disease, for example through the polio vaccine. More troubling, especially in the 1970s, were cross-species cell hybrids and imagined human–animal hybrids. This fascinating topic has great historical and theoretical potential, but could not be explored in depth in the limited space of this book, so Wilson understandably focuses instead on the more pertinent issue of the promotion of cell culture as a possible substitute for animal experimentation.

The final chapter raises the new property and consent issues that surrounded commercial uses of cultured tissue in the 1980s and 1990s, leading up to the 2004 Human Tissue Act. Here, Wilson foregrounds legal dimensions of 'public life' and the role of activist groups in constructing them. This chapter builds up to the conclusion, where he comments on contemporary debates that

surround life *in vitro*. He suggests that we treat entities such as tissue cultures ‘as *sites of engagement*, where scientific and popular interests converge’ (p. 122, original emphasis), with the character of this engagement driven by historically specific factors. By recognizing this and paying more attention to the historical locality of these issues, Wilson argues, we may come closer to Onora O’Neill’s ideal of the ‘culture of solidarity’ between all the parties involved.

Tissue Culture in Science and Society aims to emphasize interaction between the two spheres in its title, but perhaps the author could have done more to break down what still risks appearing as a reified division between ‘science proper’ and society. The implicit model of popularization is still rather linear, if bidirectional. We are told little about the dramatic changes in the ways that science was communicated to various audiences through the twentieth century. The various genres and the audiences they address remain underanalysed and are treated as equivalent. Nor are we introduced to the science writers and journalists who had agency in making or avoiding controversy. This would, of course, have needed more research, and a longer book, but would be a worthwhile subject for further work. A more careful focus on practices of mediation could also go a long way towards refining the umbrella term ‘public life’. It is clear that tissue cultures had many lives with many publics, but merely making it plural does not go very far, either. Instead, reading the multiple interest groups that are not in any straightforward way ‘popular’ as opposed to scientific, but agents with agendas, authority and investment in the issues, could open up their ‘sites of engagement’ as a space for a more productive and multidirectional series of negotiations, especially since the claims that are at stake often have little to do with the esoteric laboratory practices.

These limitations apart, *Tissue Culture in Science and Society* is a welcome addition to the critical-historical literature on life *in vitro*. Well crafted and a pleasure to read, it is accessible to non-specialists while placing itself clearly within the scholarly literature. Above all, Wilson is to be congratulated for direct and sustained engagement with issues in current policy, while sensitively breaking new historical ground.

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