

Book reviews

Twelve Galton Lectures: A Centenary Selection with Commentaries. Edited by Steve Jones & Milo Keynes. Pp. 348. (The Galton Institute, London, 2007.) £5.00, ISBN 978-0-9546570-1-7, hardback. doi: 10.1017/S0021932008003015.

The Galton Institute (formerly the Eugenics Society, founded in 1907 as the Eugenics Education Society) is a scientific society that ‘exists to promote the public understanding of human heredity and to facilitate informed debate about the ethical issues raised by advances in reproductive technology’ (www.galtoninstitute.org.uk). The Galton Institute also has considerable interest in the historical development of hereditary science, and given its former name, this may seem to be a challenging task. This centenary selection of its annual public lectures covers a range of topics aiming to ‘demonstrate the wider context [of the eugenics movement], and to show that eugenic ideas did not develop in isolation’ (Preface, vii). Each chapter covers one of the selected historical lectures, ranging back to the first (biographical) Galton Lecture by Sir Francis Darwin in 1914, to the 1982 Lecture by Robert G. Edwards on *in vitro* fertilization. Each chapter is preceded by a brief introduction from a noted researcher in the relevant field which provides useful background and sets the lecture in a historical context – in a sense, the introductions may be of more relevance than the lectures. Perhaps surprisingly given its topic and scope, this book is extremely readable, presenting endlessly stimulating ideas.

In fact, one of the most interesting features of this book is its coverage of the historical development of ideas involved in eugenics. Though never stated outright, the book sheds something of a different light on eugenics – without repealing its negative reputation – in that this series of lectures demonstrates that this scientific perspective was a response to difficult social, economic and political issues faced by society. One of the more remarkable realizations in reading this book is that nearly all of these issues remain prominent in the news today – population pressure, genetic ‘improvements’ in relation to disease, and an over-reaching concern for the future of humanity. And, as in the news today, there is the paradox of reading lectures expressing concern for the negative effects of population pressure right alongside those proclaiming the positive aspects of fertility treatments and *in vitro* fertilization producing millions of new babies.

It is also striking that the speakers for these lectures were extremely engaged with a broad base of knowledge including scientific, ethical, social, political, religious and philosophical perspectives in their efforts to solve the world’s problems – even evolutionary science and religion are discussed side-by-side! This appears in apparent contrast to the scope of much scientific discourse today, which a) generally maintains a clear separation from religious viewpoints; and b) focuses on specialized knowledge – few modern researchers, politicians or policy-makers seem to be willing to engage at a similar level of dialogue. I wonder how much of this is a historical response to the negative overall impact of the eugenics movement as it played out, for example,

through Nazi philosophy – and whether this is why, it seems, the general public currently seem to be so distrustful of scientists and the knowledge we produce? (Consider for example, the distrustful public response to scientific views on global warming, or of evolutionary history itself.)

There are (perhaps surprisingly) very few passages in these lectures that can be described as blatantly ‘racist’, though there are those that are certainly condescending or patronizing toward the ‘unfit in society’. However, some of the ideas expressed – such as Julian Huxley’s notions of ‘improvements’ in evolution – are outdated or simply incorrect. In this sense, at least, I have learned much about the actual nature of eugenics philosophy in contrast to the usual negative and simplistic interpretations typical of textbooks and the popular media. Again paradoxically, the overwhelming attitude expressed in these writings reflects an earnestly positive ambition to resolve society’s problems through science. In this sense, the book might serve as a warning to us all – our most positive intentions may yet produce negative outcomes.

KEVIN KUYKENDALL
University of Sheffield

Biocapital: The Constitution of Postgenomic Life. By Kaushik Sunder Rajan. Pp. 434. (Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2006.) £14.99, ISBN 0-8223-3720-7, paperback. doi: 10.1017/S0021932008003027.

Recently, I skimmed a newspaper article that reported, to my horror, a woman who had her breasts removed, not because she had cancer, but because her mother did. The article then went on to describe how she then had ‘better’, larger breasts implanted and was very happy with the whole process. I cynically suspected that this woman had strategically used a layperson’s biological determinism to get what she, perhaps subconsciously, wanted. However, after reading this book, I find myself rethinking the story in a new light; as a much more complex phenomenon.

This ambitious work is multi-sited, drawing from ethnographic work in the United States and in India as well as from within various organizations involved in the genomic world. From a Marxist and Foucaultian perspective, sprinkled with a bit of retooled Wallerstein and Gramsci, Sunder Rajan develops a concept of biocapital as an emerging facet of the capitalist system. He argues that ‘understanding biocapital involves analyzing the relationship between materiality and modes of abstraction that underlie the comergences of new forms of life science with market regimes for the conduct of such science’ (p. 33). This is not simply biology as subsumed by capitalism, but instead a new capitalism and a new biology imploding into an emergent whole.

Here, it is not a coincidence that genomics has arisen at the same time as the dot.com/venture capital boom. Both have departed from their parent industries in becoming speculative and mediated by hype. Both rely, not on concrete facts or products, but on perceived possible futures. This imagined future is populated by personalised medicine and miracle cures based on an understanding of genetics.

It becomes clear that we are offered a glimpse of a world where life is a commodity. Health is not seen as something to be cultivated or achieved, but, instead, something biologically determined but that can be improved with pharmaceutical or