BOOK REVIEW

TACTICAL BIOPOLITICS: ART, ACTIVISM AND TECHNOSCIENCE

By Beatriz da Costa and Kavita Philip (eds),
Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008, 504pp, ISBN 978 0 26204 249 9

The study of the politics of biology, or biopolitics, involves engagement with a range of disciplinary perspectives. Even within the scientific community, political controversies over research and development issues abound. There are many different views about the social value of scientific research and the means by which it ought to be conducted. Consider the political history of stem cell research within the USA as some indication of the variety of perspectives on the conduct of science and the moral conflicts it can provoke.

The spectrum of political viewpoints become even broader as the circle of scientific commentators expands.[1] *Tactical Biopolitics* reflects this widening of boundaries, and draws authors from a number of disciplines, from cultural theory and sociology to bioart and new media, to investigate thematic issues related to "art, activism and technoscience". Overall, the book makes an important critical contribution to biopolitical studies and is essential reading for students who want to understand the creative frictions arising from the development of science and technology in society.

While Sections I and II are important placements for the book, the six sections that follow do not conform to any particular linear development. Indeed, linearity is probably not a particularly helpful analytical approach for the definition of this body of work, which has its roots in thirty years of conceptual development. Many of the authors also have a history of traversing disciplines, though it is highly likely that even the most established names, such as Donna Haraway, will be unfamiliar to many of the scholars that this book will reach. For example, there are – unfortunately – few references to Haraway in medical law or even animal ethics, though I would expect this book to be read by scholars in such areas.

Section I signposts the editors' desire to challenge disciplinary boundaries by investigating theoretical and practice-based approaches to biological ideology. This aspiration is pursued further in the second section of the book, "Curating the Book of Life", which, in addition to identifying a key issue at the intersection of art and science, makes an important structural contribution. By connecting publicly engaged biologists with a curator, an artist and a social scientist, the imperative of the book to strategically resist biotechnological determinism by drawing on different forms of knowledge is made explicit. The remaining six thematic sections indicate key areas of research for consideration, but do not comprehensively address the spectrum of biopolitical concern.

---

[1] See A Miah and E Rich, *The Body, Health and Illness. The Media: An Introduction*, 3rd ed (Longman, forthcoming 2009).

Section III, "The Biolab and the Public" focuses on the growing number of individuals whose work may be described as "bioart", though some actors in this group resist this generic term.[2] Individual and collective bioartists have begun to infiltrate scientific laboratories in order to create art that utilises biological matter from both human and non-human species. Their work does not necessarily derive from our post-genomic era, but anticipates things to come and often utilises more primitive biological processes to create new forms of representation. While this Section draws on some of the key artists in the area, it somewhat neglects the equally interesting developments within *biodesign*, which operates at the interface between science and commercial products that affect our culture. Instead, its focus is on the process of artists working in biology, particularly through the work of Symbiotica.

Section IV, "Race and the Genome", discusses a number of consequences arising from the genetic era for the conduct of policing, notably the use of DNA databanks and genetic fingerprinting. These chapters focus on resistance to *genetic essentialism*, a theme that has been common to social and ethical studies of genetics in the last ten years.[3] As such, the critique of essentialist practices by Paul Vanouse is not new, nor does it address the way in which social scientists such as Nelkin and Lindee[4] or even Jon Turney[5] have discussed cultural beliefs about genes. Another important omission includes consideration of the Human Genome Diversity Project – or Vampire project, as it was called – which caused such controversy in the mid 1990s. Yet, the analyses are perceptive and allow consideration of how to make sense of complex technical concepts in the public domain.

Section V, "Gendered Science", addresses how technoscience imposes certain gendered norms on audiences and consumer groups. The opening chapter discusses the artworks of subRosa, the contested space of reproductive technologies and the "growing concern" about cosmetic surgery, which continues to promise positive transformations to the female form. Other chapters consider more explicitly the marketisation of gender through science, which encompasses debates about property rights, patenting, and technological governance. The section reinforces the moral and ethical parameters of the book, in which authors highlight awareness of various struggles for social justice that have taken place through forms of creative activism, most notably fiction writing.

Section VI, "Expertise and Amateur Science", discusses the "co-production of knowledge by expert and amateur scientists". However, the debates do not draw very heavily on discussions about expertise that have taken place in science, medicine and technology and which are found in literature on the public understanding of science. This surprising omission does not detract from the value of the essays, which include discussions about AIDS treatment activism and challenges to medical authority by communities of sufferers. Perhaps the most important essay is that of Beatriz da

---

[2] See E Kac "Transgenic Art" or P Thomas' "Nanoart" in A Miah (ed), *Human Futures: Art in an Age of Uncertainty* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008).

[3] See B Almond and M Parker (eds), *Ethical Issues in the New Genetics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

[4] D Nelkin and MS Lindee, *The DNA Mystique: The Gene as a Cultural Icon* (New York: W H Freeman & Co, 1995).

[5] J Turney, *Frankenstein's Footsteps: Science, Genetics and Popular Culture* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1998).

Costa, which considers how the artist can operate as an "activist intellectual situated between the academic and the general public". These aspirations resonate with the progress of practice-based research in recent years, but further consideration is needed to define the *academic* too, or any number of creatively-inclined activists who might seek to effect change by drawing variously on intellectual thought, creative works or scientific methods.

Section VII considers "Biosecurity and Bioethics", though the title is something of a misnomer, as wider ethical issues are addressed within it. The main concerns are with aspects of social justice and individual or collective liberty, particularly in the context of bio-surveillance. The chapter by Rabinow and Bennett is the most explicitly focused on bioethics, considering the recent history of bioethics within public policy and how it has been politicised through large scale publicly funded projects like the Human Genome Project. The section is also the main one to address questions about the good life, as authors consider what sort of life is worth living in an era of biotechnological consumption. A particular concern, addressed by Jonathan King and the Critical Art Ensemble, is how the operation of bio-surveillance protects the public interest while sustaining individual freedoms.

The Final Section, "Interspecies Co-Production", expands upon an earlier essay by Beatriz da Costa and may have been better placed before Section VII, due to the broad philosophical inquiry of Section VII into the good life. As a concluding section, it does not pretend to offer a summative vision of the book, though one may infer from earlier chapters that a critical resolution must arise from the imminent transgenic era that has already begun. This section may seem disingenuous, since the possibility of sharing biology tends only to work – thus far – in the direction of assisting *human* life, rather than nonhuman animals. Yet, to refute this, Donna Haraway draws attention to the shared experience of life enjoyed by companion species – in her case between dog and human – in a common endeavour where each is the means of the others' end.

Numerous chapters within *Tactical Biopolitics* begin with the same, overarching question: "What do inquiring, curious or anxious publics need to understand about biology and its current research frontiers?" Yet, the contributions omit consideration of long-standing bodies of literature that have examined notions of the public, particularly those found in such journals as the *Public Understanding of Science* or *New Genetics and Society*. Nevertheless, the book arrives at a time when debates about public engagement with science have reached maturity and specificity – where considerations of different kinds of publics, such as artists – have permitted a more considered discussion of what can tangibly be done to resist scientific determinism.

The absence of the perspective of a bioethicist in the collection is perhaps its main weakness. While some of the authors here have skirted the field of bioethics, even the section on "Biosecurity and Bioethics" does not begin to address the ideas of the large group of actors who have influenced the moral and policy debates surrounding the emergence of new biological processes. Moreover, no reference is made to certain key figures such as Francis Fukuyama, who have brought debates about biotechnology into the broader political sphere, or to popular works of celebrated scientists such as

Ian Wilmut[6] or Craig Venter.[7] Arguably, such public intellectuals and "best seller" autobiographies are primary mechanisms.

The book invites further consideration of what it means to isolate notions of the artist from other forms of cultural provocateur that occur within science, academia and elsewhere, and perhaps also arts institutions via cultural producers. In a world in which trans-disciplinary studies are really taken seriously and where collaborative art is celebrated, it seems crucial to resist the categorisation of individuals as either one thing or another. The self-identification of an artist, as such, may be more like joining a political party - involving the adoption of specific values - than a characteristic that is inherent to a particular way of working.

Whatever form the resistance takes, *Tactical Biopolitics* provides a much needed guerrilla-style guide to resisting the normative tendencies of the biotechnology industry. As such, it deserves to be core reading for courses in new media art, science and technology studies, and studies of contemporary cultural theory. What is perhaps most interesting about the essays, however, is the likelihood that the proposed forms of resistance will engage law as much as philosophy or cultural theory. As such tactics give rise to new legal issues – from the consideration of how to exhibit transgenic art works to the collapsing of intellectual property via *copyleft* and Creative Commons licensing – these actors may require lawyers as much as they will need gallery space.

Professor Andy Miah

Chair of Ethics and Emerging Technologies, Faculty of Business & Creative Industries, University of the West of Scotland; Fellow, Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies, USA; Fellow, Foundation for Art and Creative Technology, UK.

DOI: 10.2966/scrip.060309.766

[6] I Wilmut "Dolly: The Age of Biological Control", in J Burley (ed), *The Genetic Revolution and Human Rights: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures 1998* (Oxford: OUP, 1998), 19-28.

[7] JC Venter, *A Life Decoded* (New York: Viking, 2007).