

REVIEW

Neoliberal Biopolitics through the Spectacles of the Gene

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Genes and the Bioimaginary: Science, Spectacle, Culture, by Deborah Lynn Steinberg, London and New York: Routledge, 2016, 200 pp., £35.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9781409462552

Who or what is the subject of the gene, and where might we locate the ethical and political agency of genetic subjects? This is not just a matter of me myself as the object of genetic ‘causality’ or agent of rational choice. The gene and its cultural rhetorics of risk and redemption increasingly frame the ways that I am incited to intervene into my life, to mitigate my risks, to heal my illnesses, to correct my deviance, to eradicate or to enhance, and to understand who and what I am, at last, with the purported certainty of science. Gay genes, Jewish genes, cancer genes, genes for disease, for intelligence, for intergenerational trauma or alcoholism. The list is virtually limitless. For every human social enigma, it seems, there is a genetic solution—or the spectacular *promise* of one—just around the corner.

Deborah Lynn Steinberg’s *Genes and the Bioimaginary* critically responds to the infectious and oftentimes cruel phantasies purchased on and promulgated by ‘the gene’—that dominant trope permeating our popular *episteme*, figure of cultural mythology and everyday commonsense. Steinberg visits an array of familiar sites where the gene is at work in—and *as*—the interplay of neoliberal state science, mediated spectacle, and popular culture. ‘The socio-cultural, biopolitical and bioethical dimensions of genes’, she argues, ‘articulate with the power of spectacle and projection and the cultural negotiations that constitute genetic capital’ (p. 4).

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This constellation suggests a neoliberal present: a surreal time that is now but not-now, ours but not-*yet* ours, configured as a vital projection into perpetually deferred futures accrued in and on the promises of scientific rationality and consumer choice. Familiar sites of ‘genetified’ commonsense (to use Steinberg’s terms) become unfamiliar and troubling when we begin to understand the transitive agency of the gene, its discursive power to constitute those everyday objects and objectives that we perceive as normal, and oftentimes desirable. We see how the gene has become an integral part of our neoliberal ethic and worldview. And yet, the ‘neoliberal ethic’ is, as Steinberg notes, ‘one that the body will always fail’ (p. 123). Whither these withering bodies?

Rather than summarising the book’s specific sites of analysis—on the gendered body, the racialised body, the diseased body, the criminal, and the homosexual, among others—I address the critical stakes of this work as a whole: to stress why it is important to study the gene’s normalising power and to approach ‘genetified’ commonsense with the uncommon sense that this book seeks to convey in its interdisciplinary journey through social semiotics, film studies, cultural psychoanalysis, and the methods of narrative and discourse analysis. The critical import of this book does not rest on the persuasive analysis of any particular site or on its methodologies, but as a whole prompts us to rethink the venerated discourses of genetic science and their grip on the popular imaginary or ‘bioimaginary’, in which ‘the underlying biopolitical and bio-ethical sensibilities of genes’ (p. 3) have come to inform our preconceptions of life itself.

Here, the gene figures prominently in the dominant discourse on life and *lifetime*, a biopolitical phenomenon that has progressively and pervasively converged on the social field. *Genes and the Bioimaginary* addresses the gene, then, as a critical theoretical lens—as a means to describe and to interpret the salient effects of this convergence on human subjectivity and sociality, through the ‘spectacles’ of the gene and in their congenital perspectivalism.

To better understand these ways of seeing, one of the book’s many compelling arguments effectively redeploys Bollas’s (1987) psychoanalytic concept of ‘normotic phantasy’. For Bollas, normotic illness represents a pathological investment in what is perceived as normal, where the self idealises, embodies, and comports itself in accordance with phantasies of the norm. In Steinberg’s cultural analysis, the gene figures precisely as just such a ubiquitous and normalising force, the ‘relay’ or switchpoint (Foucault, 1977) of power in and through which scientific, mediatised, and cultural discourses seize upon our imagination to ‘genetify’ it. This cultural neurosis has been domesticated and normalised. In her words,

normotic values and normotic phantasy might describe the invested repudiation of what is subjective (feeling, the body) in favour of an idealised ultimate rationality. As such . . . normotic phantasy constitutes the cultural ‘unconscious’ or *persuasion* of modernity and modern science, with their

principled claims of rational utilitarianism, objectivity and natural law. (p. 6; emphasis in original)

‘Persuasion’ in this context suggests a rhetoric of the gene, in which the gene might be described in Aristotelian terms as a *topos* or commonplace, a figure that works hard figuratively, and transitively, to *displace* rational argument under the enthusiastic guise, paradoxically, of championing it. The word ‘persuasion’ is apt, given the ‘genetifying’ discourses of the everyday: more seductive than certain, these discourses often do violence to science, nature, and truth, but more than this, they furnish us with those commonplaces—or tropes—in and through which I relate to myself, to my body, to illness, to life, and to others.

Genetic persuasions exceed the kind of ‘cruel optimism’ suggested by Berlant, ‘when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing’ (2011, p. 1). More than an affective relation, genetic ‘obstacles’ are vehemently disavowed as disposable. The transitive agency of ‘the gene’ figures, then, as part of a biopolitical nexus, in Foucault’s terms as the power to ‘*make live and let die*’ (2003, p. 246). The discursive insistence on life today is part of a neoliberal machinery that epistemically and affectively informs what ‘life itself’ means—at once the most material, molecular phenomenon, and yet also the most angelic, phantasmatic.

‘Life’ has increasingly come to inform the ways that individuals are governed as members of a population whose lives and vital well-being are subject to state regulation, surveillance, segregation, health and welfare, pro-‘life’ policies, and improvement programmes, through education, forecasts, securitisation, risk-management, and statistical measures. The apostles of a so-called affirmative biopolitics (e.g. Hardt & Negri, 2005; Rose, 2006) ultimately seem driven by a utilitarian calculus promising more life for the masses while disavowing those we ‘let die’ in the very name of life. Ceding to the inevitability of our biopolitical and neoliberal futures, they uncouple the ways that ‘making live’ relies on the those we ‘let die’—those who are disaffected and dismissed in marketised neoliberal terms as collateral damages, negative externalities, or opportunity costs.

In an ‘affirmative’ vein, Esposito (2013) suggests that the biopolitical trend is ‘irreversible’, but this does not mean, he claims, ‘that another kind of democracy is impossible, one that is compatible with the biopolitical turn’ (p. 110). Indeed, Esposito argues that we are compelled to choose between biopolitics and totalitarianism, and that biopolitics is the only ‘democratic’ option. Many of us, Steinberg included, remain unconvinced that an affirmative biopolitics could affirm what we call human life or what answers that call, democratically or otherwise. Affirmative biopoliticians and theorists too quickly sever the links between making live and letting die, rendering the sick, the dying, and the dispossessed as ghostly figures who lack a voice, a language, in which to disaffirm these narrow renderings of biopolitical ‘life’. The unthinking exuberance over our ‘genetic’ futures is a case in point. As Steinberg notes, ‘the neoliberal ideal can only be realised by bodies in

perpetual motion and technologies that functionally defy (and eradicate) the essentially entropic character of life itself" (p. 127).

The gene as an instance of neoliberal biopolitics thus occasions what is for me the book's most compelling register: an appeal for an ethics beyond the alleged 'ethical facticity' of the gene—one which obliges us to rethink subjectivity and possible forms of political and ethical resistance. The challenge is legion because our normotic phantasies are more than a mere pathological investment in what is 'normal'. Our pathological investments are, moreover, *normative*. They are, in other words, not just about who or what we are (epistemically or ontologically), but about who or what we *ought to be*, and what we ought to *do* in order to secure this future, now. Around these normative claims—both on us and through us—we might find ourselves inhabiting the weird and impossible temporality of science fiction.

The promised future of the gene 'becomes' the present, in biotechnologies and their insistent narratives of life and survivorship, which work tirelessly to project the idea of living into the future, and disease and death into the abstract underside, the busy silence of genetic markers and tests promising a healthy and happy life. The gene operates out onto a belated future that is statistically predetermined, biomedically administrated, and yet never quite operationally present.

We submit to statistical paradigms and predictive rationalities projected into the realm of potentiality, which dismiss or defend against the proximity of disease and death in the utopian narratives of biomedical and biotechnological progress. The gene thus rhetorically cultivates a melancholic deportment in which we steadfastly refuse to mourn, in which we repudiate loss and death, and insist that we can choose to live, if only we fully embrace the affirmative terms that are proffered. This involves, too, a repudiation of our own bodies, our human finitude, and the ways in which these aspects of human being are shared—uncomfortably, to be sure.

If the body will always fail the neoliberal ethic, might we hear in this failure, this body, a call to repudiate the repudiations demanded by the rhetorics of the gene, its science, its spectacles, its cultures? For many this will prove to be an ethic of discomfort (Foucault, 2000), perhaps even of abandonment and loss: to relinquish the many seductions of 'genetified' discourses, to give up that false and idealised self, immaculate if not immortal, that is cultivated in the gene's counterfactual futures. This is not quite the call to forsake scientific inquiry; rather, replying to the utopian futures of 'the gene' it is clear that such an ethic cannot be beholden to the purchase of state science and biocapital. It might instead point the way toward our being-together, in sickness and in health, and to suggest how even our normotic phantasies, 'genetified' or otherwise, express a desire, a search, for what we share as human beings. We would be called on, then, to reimagine the rhetorics of life and self-relation, and to recognise a language, latent but perhaps not altogether lost, in which I might find myself

together with you, here and now, to live in this moment with those uncertainties, these bodies, that make us human after all.

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