

Review of *Becoming Biosubjects: Bodies, Systems, Technologies*

AUDREY L'ESPÉRANCE

School of Political Studies, University of Ottawa, Canada

Becoming Biosubjects: Bodies, Systems, Technologies

Written by Neil Gerlach, Sheryl N. Hamilton, Rebecca Sullivan, Priscilla L. Walton
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, (2011), ISBN 978-0-8020-9683-8

Becoming Biosubjects is a multidisciplinary collection of essays that provides an essential historical overview of Canadian debates related to the social impacts of biotechnologies along with a conceptual discussion of the context-sensitive use of internationally established notions such as biopolitics, governmentality and biosubjectivity. Gerlach (sociology/anthropology), Hamilton (law/communication), Sullivan (communication/culture), and Walton (literature) anchor their theoretical arguments with accessible engaging empirical demonstrations and illustrate their case studies with popular culture techno-science representations (films, TV series, novels, etc.).

Following the influential work of Nikolas Rose (2007) and Paul Rabinow (1994), *Becoming Biosubjects* proposes an empirically driven study of biosociality in the Canadian context. This book's most notable strength is the historical overview of Canadian national and provincial debates and legislation that the four case studies present. The introduction stresses the need for a cultural study of technology in Canada. Many studies were conducted in the United States and in Europe on the social impacts of biotechnologies, bioscience, and biomedicine in the last decade. Nevertheless, a lack of Canadian literature on the issues contributes to the need for greater awareness of policy developments in these areas; the management of contemporary debates over technological advances and ethical questions they raise; and the routinization of medical, legal and research practices in the country. The

Correspondence Address: Audrey L'Espérance, School of Political Studies, University of Ottawa, 550 Cumberland Street, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5 Canada. Tel.: +1 (877) 868-8292, Email: audrey.lesperance@gmail.com

ISSN: 1911-4788

authors attempt to fill this gap by providing four wide-ranging case studies on DNA identification, reproduction, biopatents, and biosecurity.

The authors relate their Canadian cases to the American, European and/or international experiences to be able to fully make their points and advance their arguments. Far from being a disadvantage, the comparative nature of the book makes it all the more engaging and connects it to issues and questions that are not unique to the Canadian experience. In addition, the authors remind us that Canada has always been a player in the market of techno-science by revealing hidden or neglected events such as the germ warfare project of 1940, the first patent application for Harvard College's oncomouse in 1985 or the Pioneer Hi-Bred case in 1989. Further, the way it emphasizes the distinct moments that marked the slow but sure construction of biosubjects in Canada is significant. Drawing on the examples of David Milgaard, Henry Morgentaler, Monsanto's canola seeds, the management of SARS, smallpox, and the anthrax crisis among other cases, *Becoming Biosubjects* treats the reader to a comprehensive selection of cases from the genetically engineered and manipulated material to the technologically assisted real life situations and science fiction-like discoveries.

This book also provides a detailed discussion of sociological notions that emerge and/or are redefined in this biotechnological era. Foucault's concept of biopower is omnipresent through the chapters in the way the four scholars present the notions of politicization, privatization, normalization, and responsabilization of selves, life and biological material. The authors also nuance their definition of these concepts to better fit the Canadian cases, and accordingly provide a better understanding of the specific circumstances reported in the case studies. Perhaps one of the greatest contributions of this book is the way they define biogovernance as a process of framing politics. Throughout the book, Gerlach and his colleagues argue that policy framing and reframing dynamics influence the debates and therefore the practices of biopolitics in Canada. Discourses are depicted as affecting institutions, norms and routines as well as the meaning of technology and its social application.

However, the book also highlights the need for researchers interested in biogovernance to pay closer attention to two issues specific to Canada. First, litigation is mentioned in each case study, but not formally discussed apart from the case of biopatents. Courts have been central arenas in which new discourses have been mobilized in many of the debates taken up in the book's respective chapters. The chapters talk about court cases as confirmations of new ideas, but not as milieus that produce meanings as well. Second, the case study on sexual politics offers a strong illustration of the passage from the bodily integrity discourse of the 1990's inherited from the abortion debate to the health and economic rationale that is widespread today. Though, Chapter 3 is unable to show the separation between issues of reproduction and embryo research steadily institutionalized after the Royal Commission on New Reproductive Technologies, leaving many questions unanswered. For instance, why was the feminist frame removed from the assisted human reproduction debate in the first place?

Above all, *Becoming Biosubjects* successfully shows how narratives and imagery combine unexpected possibilities with actual practices to create new representations of bodies and technologies. This book, therefore, will be of interest to all social science scholars concerned with the social effects of science and technology.

References

- Rabinow, P. (1994). The third culture. *History of the Human Sciences*, 7(2), 53-64.
- Rose, N. (2007). *The politics of life itself: Biomedicine, power, and subjectivity in the twenty-first century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.