

'Good Science'

Genes, Cells and Brains: the Promethean Promises of the New Biology, by Hilary Rose and Steven Rose. London: Verso, 2013, 336 pp, 978-1844678815

Reviewed by Manu Bazzano for *Self & Society* Journal of Humanistic Psychology Winter 2013

On chapter 3 of this truly remarkable book, in examining the ever-ambivalent liaison science has with ethics, the authors focus on the 'Doctor's Trial', a chapter in the international prosecution of Nazi war criminals which took place in Nuremberg in 1946. Throughout the trial, the Nazi doctors confidently defended what they called their 'research ethics': their practices were not dissimilar from those performed in other countries, they contended; like scientists in the US, Europe and elsewhere, they too were doing 'good science'. Doctors had already played a key role in eugenics and the implementation of 'racial hygiene' in Germany before the outbreak of war, exterminating 400.000 'mentally unfit' German citizens in the name of 'public service'. With the trial focusing on war crimes only, the massacre was not on the agenda:

Since they shared with the Nazis the eugenics project of reducing the numbers of the unfit, prosecuting the murderers would not only have extended the charges beyond war crimes but potentially opened up the uncomfortable question of what other nation states had done and were doing to their 'mentally unfit' fellow citizens. Instead, the Nuremberg prosecutors focused on wartime experiments conducted on foreign nationals: Jews, Roma, communists, socialists or the physically or mentally 'unfit'. This was seen as a way of avoiding an unwelcome precedent for intervention in the internal affairs of a state (p. 93)

Twenty-three medical researchers were accused of murder and torture; sixteen were found guilty; seven of them were acquitted, including Hubert Strughold who was recruited into US bio-medical research. His was not an isolated case. Several scientists with a Nazi background were recruited by the Truman administration in 1946 during *Operation Paperclip*, a clandestine transportation to the US, with fake visas and forged documents, of dozens of Nazis from Germany, together with collaborationists residing in Eastern Europe and in the Baltic countries. The USA intended to employ their expertise and when the entire operation was exposed, Truman justified his actions by saying that these people were 'freedom fighters'.¹ Denazification was remarkably inconsistent, with Nazi scientists becoming, in the decades that followed directors of leading laboratories in West Germany and in other western countries. Could there be a link between Nazi eugenics and the dominant post-war view of biology and science applied to human beings? Is the notion of the 'mentally unfit' entirely divorced from some of the dominant perspective on human psychology?

¹ Bazzano, M. *Spectre of the Stranger: towards a Phenomenology of Hospitality* Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2012 pp. 101-102

Before dismissing the question as preposterous, merely provocative or irrelevant, it might be good to ponder on what Werner Leibbrand had to say. Leibbrand had been a doctor in Germany but lost his position because of his wife's Jewish ancestry. He somehow survived the Third Reich and became a medical historian. Called by the prosecutors at Nuremberg who were trying to establish a precursor ethical code, he argued that since the beginning of the twentieth century, the dominant view among scientists and physicians in Germany was that patients were 'a mere object, like a mail package'; they were not considered as people, but as 'a series of biological events'. He saw a disturbing continuity between this view of human beings and those of US biomedical researchers. His disturbing piece of evidence was conveniently set aside, in favour of other, more palatable views, mainly espoused by Ivy, an influential figure within the American Medical Association, who emphasized the importance of scientific research over and above considerations on the protections of patients.

A historian of the trial wrote: 'The primary objective of Ivy's medical ethics principles was to ensure that human experiments were possible in the future. All other issues, like the protection of human and patients rights in medical science, or the role of informed consent were secondary to this over-arching objective' (p. 97). What mattered most to scientists of the twentieth century (and to Darwin and his colleagues in the nineteenth century) was to ensure a future for biological experimentation upon humans and animals. The dominant view was that what had happened in Nazi Germany was an aberration – there was no need for explicit ethical considerations to be applied to the practice of science within western democracies.

"For most it was business as usual; research carried out in a democratic country was by definition ethical" (p. 97), which meant that the Nuremberg Code, emphasizing above all protection of the patient and of the patient's human rights, was duly ignored.

The Nuremberg Code is patient/client-centred: a move beyond exclusive reliance on the paternalistic Hippocratic oath and a crucial stress on the moral agency of the patient in biomedical research. The patient must be informed of the aims of the experiment, must be "free to give or withhold their consent, and must have the unqualified right to withdraw from the research ... Furthermore, the research should be for the good of society" (p. 98).

Yet the subsequent Helsinki Declaration set by the new World Medical Association (WMA) relegates the moral agency of the subject from the first place it occupied in the Nuremberg Code to the *ninth*. 'Good science' becomes instead the key criterion, a sinister echo of the Nazi doctors' defence at Nuremberg, i.e. the prioritization of 'good science' over human rights. The election of the ex Nazi Hans Joachim Sewering to the WMA presidency in 1992 (who later was forced to resign due to international protest) was a conspicuous event. He had allegedly been "responsible for the death of 900 physically and mentally disabled children by transferring them from Schoenbrunn to the Eglfing-Haar 'healing centre', a euthanasia facility south of Munich" (p. 100). Sewering was charged with the death of fourteen-year-old Babette Fröwis, whom he diagnosed as an epileptic and sent to Eglfing-Haar without even seeing her. In 2008 the by now nonagenarian was awarded Gunther-Budelmann medal for 'services to the nation's health system' by the German Federation of Internal Medicine.

The Nuremberg trial and the problems of post-war science constitute only one example within one of the topics discussed by the authors. As epitomized by the title, this accessible

and outstanding book examines three main topics: genomics, regenerative medicine and neuroscience. The unifying factors for all three are the utter failure in recognizing the complexity of human beings as biosocial creatures shaped by history, the overriding and highly manipulative influence of neo-liberal politics and the resulting transformation of the human sciences into biotechnosciences, i.e. the “blurring of boundaries between science and technology, universities, entrepreneurial biotech companies and the major pharmaceutical industries” (p. 2). In the process, Prometheus – the Titan who stole the fire from the Gods to give it to mankind and who also fashioned the first human from clay – becomes Frankenstein’s monster.

The current fusion of biomedicine and biotechnology promises to transform the lives of a wealthy minority for the better. Evolutionary theory offers to explain human origins; genomics promises to define difference; the neurosciences promise to predict behaviour, explain consciousness and, as with Simon Baron-Cohen and ‘brain organization theory’ (fiercely criticized by feminist neuroscientists Jordan-Young and Fine), even resurrect essentialism within gender difference.

The marriage of convenience between reductive science and neo-liberalist ideology has its roots already in Darwin and his embracing of Malthusianism. That Darwinism had from the start all the hallmarks of an ideology was crystal clear to one of Darwin’s contemporaries, Karl Marx, who in a letter to Engels of 18 June 1862, three years after the publication of *On the Origin of the Species*, observed how remarkable it was that Darwin had discovered, among the beasts and plants, the society of England with its division of labour, competition, opening up of new markets, ‘inventions’ and Malthusian ‘struggle for existence’. Liberalism and Darwinism fed on each other: the former assumed from the notion of natural selection a scientific validation for the affirmation of the struggle for existence in society, while the latter acquired a philosophical framework which propelled the popularity of the idea. The result was *pseudo-biological pessimism*, not at all inevitable when one thinks of the different route taken around the same time by Russian evolutionary scientists and which culminated with Kropotkin’s (1902) notion of ‘struggle for life’ against Darwin’s ‘struggle for existence’. This was not a matter of semantics but an altogether different vision which engendered Kropotkin’s idea of *mutual aid* against the unbridled individualism of Darwin’s notion.

The 1980s and the 1990s have prolonged the honeymoon between evolutionary psychology (itself a renewed version of the mid-seventeenth century notion of biology-as-destiny) and the pharmaceutical industry. The scenery for such money-spinning liaison was happily provided by neo-liberalism, with its vision of the world as a jungle of brutal struggle where only the toughest (and the richest) survive and where the maladjusted have to be anaesthetized.

That science is objective and disinterested is a myth the authors debunk with great skill. Recognizing that such a task is still urgent today might come as a shock to some readers, given whole decades of battles for human rights and against the subservient role of science to the interest of capitalism.

The effects of the dominant scientific reductionism on psychology and psychotherapy are self-evident. This superb book provides ammunition for future battles.