

People's Science: Bodies and Rights on the Stem Cell Frontier

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Ruha Benjamin

People's Science: Bodies and Rights on the Stem Cell Frontier. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013. ISBN 978-0804782975, 272 pp.

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In this post-9/11 world, few people remember that the defining act of George W. Bush's early presidency was his announcement on August 9, 2001, restricting the use of federal funds for research on human embryonic stem cells. In the following months some scientists declared that they would take their labs overseas to work in jurisdictions more congenial to stem cell research; others called for nonfederal sources to step into the breach. A number of states heeded the call, foremost among them California, which introduced Proposition 71 to the electorate to authorize the issuance of \$3 billion in state bonds over 10 years to fund stem cell research. This massive infusion of research funds would be managed by a new state agency known as the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine, which, in turn, would be overseen by an Independent Citizens' Oversight Committee. Voters adopted Proposition 71 in November 2004, establishing California as a major player in the field of stem cell research.

In her excellent book, *People's Science: Bodies and Rights on the Stem Cell Frontier*, Ruha Benjamin, assistant professor in the Center for African American Studies at Princeton University, employs subtle and sophisticated multisited research to explore the complex social and political dynamics implicated in the campaign for Proposition 71 and its aftermath in California. In Benjamin's hands this becomes a story about much more than this particular campaign, as she uses this rich case study to deftly examine much broader questions about the contested relations among scientific endeavors, commercial interests, state power, and the nature of citizenship in a world of grand biomedical enterprises.

People's Science eschews engagement with the fraught prolife politics that gave rise to President Bush's initial announcement to focus on how the California campaign raised a different set of questions implicating diverse actors who variously made claims upon the institutional structures mandated by Proposition 71 or who had claims made upon them as part of the process of enlisting support both for the proposition and for subsequent research endeavors.

The book begins by introducing the campaign and its key actors and then moves on to a series of chapters based on Benjamin's work in diverse sites across the state. She takes us into agency hearings, hospitals, civic forums, and even the homes of clinic patients. Throughout, Benjamin notes subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle attempts by Proposition 71 advocates to insulate the process and the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine from politics, particularly from interference by the state legislature. In one chapter, Benjamin explores challenges raised by disability rights advocates over how some stem cell advocates marginalized their perspectives and decontextualized scientific research in a manner that obscured the social and political conditions that framed the very disabilities the advocates sought to address. A chapter on "Eggs for Sale" explores the debates over whether women should be compensated for providing eggs for research. The book also contains an insightful discussion of trustworthiness in biomedical research and calls for developing "technologies of humility" (p. 154) that recognize and address conditions of inequality and power imbalances that

underlie researcher/subject relations. A chapter on stem cell research and racial disparities opens with the haunting quotation: “Why am in such demand as a research subject when no one wants me as a patient?” (p. 113). In many respects this captures a core concern of the book: the tension between enlisting public support for this massive effort while ignoring the lived social conditions of that same public.

The idea of a “people’s science” implicates the multiple valences of a public project that is aimed at serving the people but that also necessarily depends on the participation of people to succeed. Exploring the co-emergence of novel life sciences and new rights claims, Benjamin frames her analysis with reference to the idea of “bioconstitutionalism,” which she uses to explore how the campaign for Proposition 71 itself “constituted” different “publics.” She notes how the campaign cast the “right” kind of public as that which wholeheartedly supported the proposition and were willing to participate as research subjects, whereas opponents or simply those with meddlesome concerns (whether about commercialization, focus of research, etc.) were cast as problematic citizens—even as they were exercising citizen rights of voice and participation.

In many respects this is about reconfiguring the nature of public obligation under a neoliberal biomedical regime. After 9/11 President Bush told us all we had a duty to go out and shop. In the world presented to us by Benjamin, the good citizen no longer only has a duty to consume but also to be consumed—that is, to provide biological materials to researchers to promote medical breakthroughs. *People’s Science* provides an original and fresh insight into how broader social and political concerns of *cui bono*—who benefits?—may be both asserted and elided in this new bioconstitutional order.

Catherine Bliss

Race Decoded: The Genomic Fight for Social Justice.
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The relationship between genetics and race has a long and tangled history. While the genetics of blood types was used from the 1920s to characterize “races,” in the 1930s, Julian Huxley and Alfred

Haddon deployed genetics in a text, *We Europeans* (1935), aimed explicitly against Nazi racism. The 1950s UNESCO statements on race likewise betrayed ambivalence, with geneticists and physical anthropologists supporting the statements’ anti-racist political intent while some of them equivocated on the genetic reality of race and its possible link to such traits as IQ.

In this important and compelling book, Bliss explores this relationship, focusing on “the decade of the genome” (2000–2010) in the United States. She argues that genomic projects starting in the 1980s, such as the Human Genome Project, were color-blind, ignoring race. In the 1990s, the process Steven Epstein calls “inclusion” took hold in U.S. science and medicine, as racial and gender differences became a legitimate and state-mandated focus for organizing data, in order to monitor inequalities and better pursue social justice. By the mid-2000s, U.S.-based geneticists had become “race-positive,” focusing on race as a social and biological phenomenon, seeing this focus as necessary for the anti-racist activism they supported, promoting the inclusion of racial minorities and populations in the global South as researchers and subjects, and trying to build reciprocal relationships with subject communities. This was “antiracist racialism,” pursued through a self-reflexive “biosocializing,” in which scientists were often inspired to follow an ethical mission by personal experiences with racial inequality. They (and others) saw genomics as uniquely positioned to deliver the truth about race and help solve social problems.

Bliss starts with the advent of new technologies for exploring genetic difference, usually for medical purposes (admixture mapping, ancestry informative markers, genomewide association studies, etc.) and explores mega-projects that mapped diversity (the HapMap Project, the National Geographic Project, etc.). She then depicts the emergence of a “sociogenomic paradigm,” in which geneticists came to agree that race had social, biological, and genetic dimensions (whereas before the aim had been to produce a truly genetic description of race or to disprove it completely), and guides us through the diverse stances geneticists adopt on the relation between (1) genetic data about human diversity, (2) some of those data organized into categories of continent-based genetic ancestry (commonly—and tellingly—simplified to African, European, Amerindian, and Asian), and (3) lay taxonomies of race.

The last chapters explore how geneticists use taxonomies in the practice of sampling people and