[Review] Wastell, D. and White, S. (2017) Blinded by science: the social implications of epigenetics and neuroscience

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Blinded by Science: The social implications of epigenetics and neuroscience by David Wastell and Sue White (2017) Bristol: Policy Press. 256 pages. ISBN 978 1 447 32234 4

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Blinded by Science is an ambitious, wide-ranging and passionate account of the logical fallacies, technical shortfalls and ethical challenges for social policy and professional practice of the current ‘cultural hegemony’ of the biological sciences, particularly neuroscience and epigenetics. The authors’ declared aim is to ‘destabilise the dogmatism of apparently settled positions’, allowing the case for ‘a more inclusive and reanimated approach to human flourishing’ to emerge. By the end of the book the time and effort given to the destabilisation leaves little time for this positive account to be developed, and for the option of a mutually aligned theoretical and practice stance to be explored.

Wastell, an Emeritus Professor in Information Systems, and White, a Professor in Social Work, set out their critical account in two parts. Part one seeks to explain how the way the (bio-) sciences think produces simplification and certainty, such that the knowledge received seems to be self-evidently right. There is a double critique here. First, the validity of scientific claims in themselves is put under forensic attention, this part of the account being supported by five technical appendices. Here logical fallacy (reducing the mind to the brain) and research integrity alike are subject to detailed critique. Second, Wastell and White (following Fleck, 1979) show the way in which ‘thought styles’, such as the neuroscientific and epigenetic, become embedded as unassailable truths at the level of policy and practice. Their particular concern here is with the way ‘journal science’, itself susceptible to flaws in logic, method and analysis as discussed, gets to be ‘moulded and distilled as knowledge to go in handbooks’.

Part two of the book explores how this ‘knowledge to go’ becomes deployed in policy and practice designed for the purpose of ‘fixing real people’, especially through targeted early intervention in disadvantaged childhoods designed to secure ‘social justice at a stroke’. A moral and political case against ‘neurosociology’ is developed here. The Allen Report (2011) and David Cameron’s prime ministerial ‘life chances’ agenda (2016) are Book reviews 5 identified as examples of policy misuse of the new ‘prevention science’, where wide-scale social disadvantage is intended to be tackled ‘by professional interventions at the level of individuals’. Current adoption policy is identified as being a particular concern. Epigenetic thinking, or what White and Wastell call ‘the neuromolecular thought style’, is shown to narrow the focus of preventive intervention still further. Here the ‘dark side’ and ‘menace’ of developments are emphasised. Surveillance, as well as adversity, is said to have gone ‘under the skin’ too. The implications of this shift in the focus of human services should now be the primary concern. Resource misallocation will now become entrenched, including in research funding, as interventions become increasingly medicalised as part of the new personalised prevention agenda. ‘Neo-eugenics may have found its time’, with ‘new pathologies and new needs constantly created and remedies sought’. In these circumstances, a return to a more humane policy and practice stance is called for (see, for example, Featherstone, et al., 2014), where cultural difference is brought back to the fore in making sense of lived experience and support for coping and caring is put centre stage in professional practice once again.

This book adds to a now burgeoning critical sociological literature on the nature and significance, scientifically and politically, of the revitalisation of the engagement between the biological and the social (see Gillies, Edwards and Horsley, 2017; Meloni, et al., 2018; Rose and Abi-Rached, 2013; Rose and Rose, 2016). The extent to which this revitalisation is repudiated varies widely, as does the tone of the critique in each case. Wastell and White intend their own critical exploration to be ‘nonpartisan’, ‘purely sociological’ too. However, this is an account which communicates its alarm not only for ‘rhetorical effect’, to ‘destabilise the dogmatism of apparently settled positions’, but also in an impatient way. Indeed, some readers might think that the ethical integrity as well as the practical efficacy of their own professional (and parenting and family life) choices is also being questioned here. Instead, it is surely the case that all of us involved in the fields of social practice informed by neuroscience and epigenetics should be expected to be addressed as though we were acting in good faith and had a capacity for critical thinking. Professional susceptibility to seduction by new thought styles needs attention, of course. The uncritical presentation of slides of ‘damaged’ brains in social working training settings is of particular current concern for some of us. Indeed, White and Wastell might have made more of the way in which the scientific discourse, as so translated, objectifies children. This is not the first time the child’s lived experience has been left out of the picture (Butler-Sloss, 1988). But practitioners are able also to recognise and call out the moral and political risks of objectification when they see them while making use of new knowledge in a nuanced way, especially when it is presented with care. Scientists too are capable of conceiving the child as being ‘an intentional agent capable of representing their mental states’ despite deprivation (McCrory, Gerin and Viding, 2017: 352), and of recommending wide-ranging modes of support expected to maximise rather than marginalise that capability.

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