

Bookreview: The politics of life itself: biomedicine, power, and subjectivity in the twenty-first century. By Nikolas Rose. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2006. ISBN 9780691121918

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forms of publicness that others may not share. This underlines that when talking about public space, geographers are always and inevitably working with a specific notion of what the public city is – one that may or may not resonate with the concerns of others who are engaged in struggles for the city.

Iveson's book hence moves the debate on public space forward in a significant manner and will certainly be of interest to all geographers and urbanists for whom the life of the street holds fascination. Even those who find debates on public space somewhat arid should enjoy this book's lively range of examples. Drawn from across Australia, the case studies that Iveson presents are carefully nuanced and engage critically with ongoing debates in social and cultural geography about the making of gender, racial, age and sexual identities. Issues of aboriginal rights, youth countercultural expression, sexual citizenship and the gendering of space are flagged up by the varied case study chapters, meaning that there are multiple points of entry for those for whom public space *per se* is not a prime concern. This given, Iveson clearly demonstrates why issues of publicness should be of concern to all geographers, and he suggests that there is too much at stake to accept existing normative assumptions about the decline of the public sphere. Provocative and passionate, the fact that the book is laced with humour will also surely endear it to a student audience. For such reasons, *Publics and the city* is highly recommended both as a primer on public space as well as a state of the art intervention in debates on the 'struggle for space'.

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The politics of life itself: biomedicine, power, and subjectivity in the twenty-first century. By Nikolas Rose. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 2006. \$25.95/£14.95. ISBN: 9780691121918.

In the classic analyses of Foucault, the 18th and 19th centuries saw the emergence of a biopolitical state, in which the very vitality of individual citizens came to be the subject of systems of management (through state provision for health and welfare, for example). Such a politics centred on the human body is today being reconfigured, claims the sociologist Nikolas Rose, in his new book *The Politics of life itself*. To summarize brutally, new ways of understanding life have resulted in new forms of managing, shaping and contesting it. Thus, vital politics today, Rose suggests, 'is concerned with our growing capacities to control, manage, engineer, reshape, and modulate the very vital capacities of human beings as living creatures' (p. 3). There is much to admire in his account of the forms that such a politics is taking, and I would encourage the reader to engage with this work. But two aspects of Rose's account warrant brief commentary.

First, both life and politics are given, in my view, too narrow a definition in this book. Central to what Rose seeks to analyse, for example, is the emergence of a particular 'style of thought' – drawing on Ludwig Fleck's phrase – based upon a shift in the scale at which we think to understand, act on, and act in relation to, human life: from a clinical gaze centred upon the body, to a molecular gaze that understands life at the level of its component

parts (sequences of nucleotide bases, transporter genes and the like). This approach is in many ways quite helpful, but to its detriment, I think, it emphasizes questions of technological novelty at the expense of questions about the distribution and control of those novel systems, not to mention the social inequalities from which they actively divert attention and in some cases may be contributing towards. As in the very western biomedical practices the book seeks to analyse, the infectious diseases, poverty and inequality that structure the politics of life for most of the world's population are given scant treatment. This is not, in fairness, Rose's intention, but my point is that it could have been. That it is not is indicative of a widening gap between the literature on public health and the literature on biomedicine and the biological sciences. Much is made in this book of the new choices and new responsibilities facing the individual. There is considerable scope for setting alongside this a fuller appreciation of how those choices are shaped by the often rather older and more mundane limits set by one's social and geographical location.

Second, there is a profusion of spatial metaphors and reasoning that I think geographers might usefully elaborate, contest and refine. There is something not just inherently but constitutively geographical about many of the changes wrought by the life sciences and biomedicine in particular that Rose describes in this book and that many geographers are actively engaged in researching. In addition to using geography as a shorthand for thinking about the wider implications and distributional effects of these new technologies, therefore (Rose speaks for example of a 'cartography of the future' in lieu of a 'history of the present'), geographical notions of space, place and scale might well be usefully brought to bear upon this emergent social and scholarly field.

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