

The populist gene

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The DNA Mystique: The Gene as a Cultural Icon. By Dorothy Nelkin and M. Susan Lindee. *W. H. Freeman*: 1995. Pp. 276. \$22.95, £15.95.

In his book *The Extended Phenotype*, Richard Dawkins tells the story of a lecture during which a member of the audience became tearful at the prospect that some behavioural differences between men and women might be "genetically determined", and thus (she supposed) inevitable. The point of the story is that genetic influences on behaviour are in principle no more or less likely to be alterable than other (for example, environmental) influences; but somehow many people have come to believe that genes exert a uniquely powerful influence on our lives.

In *The DNA Mystique*, Dorothy Nelkin and Susan Lindee recount a 1993 episode of the American television programme "Law and Order", in which a young man was tried for murder. His defence attorney invoked in mitigation the fact that his client possessed the chromosomal aberration XYY; but in the event the accused man himself requested that he be given the maximum sentence: his situation, he said, was hopeless, because he was "genetically predisposed to kill".

The DNA Mystique is a full-length sociological study of the phenomenon that so intrigued Dawkins. Nelkin and Lindee are interested in the powers that are ascribed to the gene in American culture. For them, the gene is not only a biological entity but also "a cultural icon, a symbol, almost a magical force". Insisting that DNA is a molecule with social as well as biological properties, they set out to chart its presence in popular culture through the analysis of what they term "a vast, quixotic data-base" embracing not just magazines and television programmes but also cartoons, jokes, musical lyrics, radio talk shows and much more.

In essence, the story that Nelkin and Lindee tell is rather simple. For 25–30 years after the Second World War, a form of liberal environmentalism was the norm in American academic and popular culture; but over the past two decades a new form of hereditarianism has emerged in both arenas. Gaining credibility from the extraordinary advances in the field of human molecular genetics, a doctrine that Nelkin and Lindee dub "genetic essentialism" has

come to exercise increasing influence in American public life.

Genetic essentialism, we learn, "reduces the self to a molecular entity, equating human beings, in all their social, historical, and moral complexity, with their genes". Nelkin and Lindee trace the influence of this doctrine in the advertising industry, movie-making and American soap operas, as well as in apparently more serious public debates about everything from the nature of homosexuality and the alleged collapse of American family life to racial and gender differ-



From *The DNA Mystique*

ences and the nature of criminality.

Nelkin and Lindee acknowledge that genetic essentialism can serve many different social agendas; but they seem to find it being used almost everywhere to buttress the ideology of individualism. However, where once individualism was an energizing doctrine of personal hope, today it is often an enervating form of genetic fatalism.

As the authors put it: "In the 1990s, the popular rhetoric of DNA is as much about loss of control and acceptance of biological fate as it is about cure and the control of our future". Hence, presumably, the extraordinary new kind of practical aid — the 'don't help yourself' book, devoted to helping people to accept their natural limitations. Nelkin and Lindee are right to insist that the multiple cultural uses of genes and genetics are worthy of study in their own right. At a time when the term DNA is used not only in biology but also in the cosmetics industry (as the name of a perfume), in children's comic writing (*The DNA Agents*) and in a proposal for a new line of stationery (DNA cards, containing a piece of one's favourite star's DNA, courtesy of the polymerase chain reaction), it is clearly important to understand the many ways in which the double helix has now

become so much more than a mere macromolecule.

This having been said, I have two major reservations about *The DNA Mystique*. The first has to do with the nature of the evidence on which the analysis rests. Nelkin and Lindee are refreshingly frank about the eclectic nature of their "vast, quixotic data-base", as well as about the fact that theirs is "not... a statistical study but an analysis of folklore". But to describe everything reported in this book as folklore is, I think, stretching things a little. At one extreme, there are serious academic articles aimed at establishing scientific claims; and at the other there are cartoons (such as the memorable "Madame Rosa, geneticist") many of which appear to be ironic or even satirical in intent. It is not always clear what all these extremely heterogeneous cultural artefacts have to tell us about the status or the significance of DNA in popular culture.

My second, related worry has to do with the explanatory role of the concept of 'genetic essentialism'. This rather abstract concept is sufficiently general that it can be laid over an enormous range of cultural products; but once again, I doubt that everything cited or quoted here is really working to the same intellectual or ideological end. In many ways, *The DNA Mystique* hovers uneasily between a liberal-environmentalist critique of genetic essentialism (of the sort that the United States has produced in considerable numbers over the past couple of decades) and a sociological analysis of genetics in popular culture. It is the latter, in my view, that is by far the more interesting and important project; and although they have clearly not said the last word, Nelkin and Lindee are to be warmly congratulated for opening up this intriguing field to further study. □

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New Journals

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