

RESOURCES

BOOKS

Blood, genes, and profits

Sheila Jasanoff

French DNA: Trouble in Purgatory

Paul Rabinow

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“There’s no place like home, there’s no place like home,” Dorothy insists as she turns her back on the illusions of Oz. Her refrain seems just as apposite for modern anthropologists who have turned in droves from the false lure of the exotic in search of cultural meaning in their own backyards. This homing instinct has led a small but determined band of ethnographers to focus their interpretive skills on science—the component of contemporary life that has sought most assiduously to decouple itself from anything so localized, so *un*-universal as culture. Does culture nevertheless reassert itself in the doing of science, and can the forms it takes be deciphered by keen-eyed anthropologists trained in participant observation? These are some of the questions that drove Paul Rabinow to spend the first six months of 1994 in Paris, at the Centre d’Etude du Polymorphisme Humaine (CEPH), a leading French institution investigating the linkages between genes and diseases. *French DNA* is the record of his experiences.

CEPH, as Rabinow describes it, is the sort of research site beloved of anthropologists. Its external relations are complex, its internal dynamics byzantine, and its rules of conduct fluid and uncodified. Formed by the French Nobel laureate Jean Dausset, a pioneer in blood typing for transplant surgery, and guided by Daniel Cohen, its dynamic young science director, CEPH was active by the end of the 1980s on the frontlines of the international race to map the human genome. A moment of particular triumph came in 1993, when Cohen announced that CEPH had beaten its American competitors by producing the first physical map of the whole genome. This success opened CEPH to potentially lucrative research collaborations, including some bankrolled by American venture capital, ever on the lookout for new sources of profit.

CEPH’s research program was built on a

unique resource: a DNA collection derived from blood freely and repeatedly given by some 100 patient families who had been carefully cultivated by Dausset starting in the late 1960s. Following established French custom, the families were induced to stay in the project as an act of civic solidarity. Their blood was a gift to medicine and to other patients. Their only remuneration was the cost of travel to Paris. An annual picnic, paternally presided over by Dausset, ritually recognized the donors’ selfless commitment to healing. The spirit of solidarity also manifested itself in CEPH’s important research partnership with France’s extraordinary association of muscular dystrophy patients and their families.

Cohen brought a wholly different flavor to CEPH’s scientific enterprise. If Dausset was the artisan of genetic research, Cohen was the entrepreneurial industrialist. In Rabinow’s account, Cohen is all movement and action, with boundless energy that keeps him continually on the go beyond the borders of France and academic research. He is Rabinow’s sponsor, captivated by the idea of disseminating his vision through the lens of an anthropologist whom he calls a “philosophic observer.” At the time of Rabinow’s visit, Cohen’s tireless activity had brought to CEPH the possibility of collaboration with Millennium Pharmaceuticals, a Boston-based startup company eager to use the French center’s DNA collection for therapeutic research. The project brought to the fore questions about who owned or could control the genetic data. During the early months of 1994, the controversial proposal was broached to CEPH, created a firestorm that engaged prominent politicians and the national press, and eventually died. The prospect of sharing with Americans what one political leader characterized as “French DNA” underlined the uneasiness that many felt about foreign intrusions into French cultural space. This episode provides Rabinow his book title and also his argument that sites like CEPH are ethnographic goldmines in which are sorted out the values that give contemporary cultures their distinctive cast.

True to his “philosophic” mission, Rabinow speculates that recent advances in genetic science and technology have forced French intellectuals to confront a recurrent tension: between religious and humanistic

understandings of individual and society on the one hand, and, on the other, the barbaric forces of science and capital that would define the human body in terms of DNA, without the benefit of any civilizing moral discourse. He situates the CEPH-Millennium debate in this purgatorial space, between a deep-seated fear of dissolving the communal bonds of benevolence and the siren call of enlightened self-interest. What is distinctively French asserts itself not by reproducing any enduring historical patterns but through unexpected juxtapositions of persistent themes and elements. Rabinow repeatedly invokes the term “assemblage” to describe the thing he is investigating. It is a makeshift construct, unpredictable in its impact on contemporary events.

This embrace of the ad hoc and unsystematic aspects of culture raises a number of questions about Rabinow’s method and conclusions. As if serving a self-referential function, the book itself is an assemblage—a little social theory, a bit of art history, some cultural anthropology, a brief sortie into the scandal over HIV-contaminated blood, field notes from CEPH, interviews with journalists. Elegant and slim, this array of offerings has a little the effect of a taster’s menu at an extremely up-market restaurant. We are in the company of a man of taste, with an eye for presentation and a talent for mixing odd ingredients, but it is an idiosyncratic selection and, while one’s appetite is piqued, one is constantly reminded of things left out. There are places, for example, that lie outside the anthropologist’s line of sight, from CEPH board meetings to governmental advisory committees, in which the fateful encounter between DNA and French sensibilities is also being played out. Would these settings have changed the picture? Not including them surely weakens the book’s claim that renouncing the Millennium deal amounted to an assertion of patrimony in French DNA.

It is easy to agree with Rabinow that there is something qualitatively remarkable about the place of bioethics in French public discourse. It is much less obvious that bioethicists will have serious impact on the organization of research at the frontiers of human genetics. The rhetoric of solidarity may keep American capital at arm’s length for a time without forestalling equally problematic partnerships between public knowledge and private finance within France. Rabinow’s book educates us in the likely terms of the French debate. He leaves us guessing about the future of DNA in France. ///



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