

*Nikolas Rose, The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century*, Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2007, 352 páginas.

What are the consequences of such biomedical advances as genetic screening, genetic modifications of organisms, personalized medicine, psychopharmaceuticals, reproductive technologies, organ transplants, etc for human life? Are we experiencing a fundamental brake with the past? In the book *The Politics of Life Itself*, Nikolas Rose notes that commentators' positions vary, some are characterized by hopes of better future and cure of diseases, while others express fears that human nature may be violated. He sets out to examine the debates on the consequences of recent advances in biomedical research and to examine the corresponding changes. Rose outlines five important changes related to recent biomedical and biological research, e. g., molecularization, optimization, subjectification, somatic expertise and economies of vitality. While Rose identifies a series of important transformations, he consistently argues that none of these imply a fundamental brake with what went before.

*The Politics of Life Itself* examines biomedical practices and sheds light on its history. Numerous concepts for social analysis of medical technologies and biological research are presented, and their meanings and origins are outlined. Among these are crucial concepts such as biopower, biological citizenship and biosociality, in addition to bioeconomy, bioeconomics, biovalue, biocapital, biomorality, genetisicm, geneticization, genetic prudence, genetic literacy, genetic responsibility, ethopolitics, bodily ethics, ethical biocapital, etc.

The sub-chapter "The rise and fall of the gene" is revealing, and lays out the crucial background for later argumentation. Rose maintains, "researchers are coming to accept that DNA sequences alone do not comprise the master plan of organic existence" (p. 47). He points out that in genomics the word "complex" is an abused one and there is ample space for uncertainty (pp. 51-52). Consequently, there has been a shift from understanding the body as biologically fixed to something fixable through intervention using "technologies of optimization". The human body can be transformed at molecular level, instead of incorporating mechanic equipments or robots into it. The manipulations of bodies through tattoos, organ transplants, cosmetic surgery, circumcision, dieting, and physical exercise are common. According to Rose, when it comes to adjusting human moods, enhancing sports performance, slowing ageing or altering fetuses the advances have been exaggerated.

Recent advances in biomedical research have triggered important social transformations. One has to do with the relations between states and citizens. According to Rose, in the nineteenth century Europe and North America, the state acted upon the citizens through biomedicine, in contrast today the citizens themselves have become active consumers of biomedical services. The patients “became consumers actively choosing and using medicine, bioscience, pharmaceuticals, and ‘alternative medicine’ in order to maximize and enhance their own vitality” (2007, p. 23). Another transformation Rose identifies relates to the way humans think of themselves and their relations with others. The importance of conceptions of particular biological distinctiveness, for instance skin color, for citizenship has a long history. Biological citizenship may be imposed on persons who share particular common biological characteristics, or enacted with those sharing certain biological condition grouping together to press forward common interests to enhance their wellbeing. Present-day biological citizenship is mainly characterized by the latter and it “operates within the field of hope”, although with some ambiguity (2007, p. 135).

Rose is keen to underline that the aim of current research in biomedicine and biology is enhancement of life, not the conscious use of eugenics to enhance the biological fitness of the nation as was the case in Europe and North America. The aim is to improve the individual, not a nation, and it is done for economic gain. The pastoral power of today is not directed at a population or groups of people, rather it is concerned with the individual. Knowledge, often prediction of the future or estimation of risk, is passed on to the patient, who is thereafter expected to act in a responsible manner. Yet, the line between compulsion and compliance may be blurred. For Foucault biopower is a technique for the management of populations while for Rose biopower has been transformed to a technique of individualization. ‘Ethopolitics’ are used “to shape the conduct of human beings by acting upon their sentiments, beliefs, and values — in short, by acting on ethics” (2007, p. 27).

*The Politics of Life Itself* is a major step forward in understanding what has been and is going on in contemporary biomedical research and biological thinking. The chapters, which were originally written as independent essays, become a coherent whole, and each one is crucial for adding pieces to the final puzzle. The examination of the interplay of biomedical practices and the economic makeover of the time is evocative. The author is cautious not to exaggerate the importance of changes involved, and all argumentation is characterized by consistency and rigor.