



REVIEW: Ruha Benjamin, *People's Science: Bodies and Rights on the Stem Cell Frontier*

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Ruha Benjamin. *People's Science: Bodies and Rights on the Stem Cell Frontier*. xiii + 249 pp. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2013.*

Joan H. Robinson†

Though science and technology studies has broadened well past the lab to include identity groups, users, and others, a core challenge for the field remains how to make silences speak. From the silent financial backers of a scientific endeavour to those individuals who are ultimately left behind by the “march of progress,” there is a call for more research in this area. Ruha Benjamin, in *People's Science*, takes this call very seriously and places these silences at the core of her study of a stem cell research initiative. Benjamin demonstrates that a science of the people, by the people, and for the people is both deeply political and worthy of examination. *People's Science* will be interesting not only to anyone who studies science and inequality, but also to scholars of social movements and disability studies. Benjamin's concerns are equally science, democracy, innovation, and health, and she argues that these ideals do not have to be seen as competitive.

People's Science, Benjamin's doctoral dissertation in sociology, is an ethnography of the mobilization behind California's Stem Cell Initiative, Proposition 71, which passed in 2004. From the first pages, *People's Science* calls into question exactly who made up the “people” supporting the initiative. Benjamin systematically deconstructs how powerful corporate interests strategically create and mobilize a supposedly consenting “public” to further a particular scientific endeavour. Through this deconstruction, she shows that the practice of science is greatly influenced by the tensions inherent in creating a participatory science project. By breaking down both the visible and silenced politics around Proposition 71, Benjamin implores scholars to not take any social movement at face value. Though it is most definitely in the genealogy of Steven Epstein's *Inclusion* (Chicago 2007), *People's Science* turns the model on its head by showing how the powerful few can appropriate the image of the people for their own benefit. While

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scholars are often concerned with the many speaking for the few, Benjamin argues that we should be equally, if not more, concerned with the powerful few speaking for the many.

Proposition 71 had many parties at the table, most of whom had a stake in the decision on whether California would fund stem cell research. Massive corporate interests sought to create a hub of stem cell research comparable to technology's Silicon Valley. Lobbyists from disability and disease groups argued both for and against funding; some wanted cures while others saw cures (of deafness, for instance) as an affront to their dignity. Egg and zygote donors, whose bodily tissue would be used for research, had a stake in how much their tissues and their labor in producing them would be worth. "Biological citizens" who were invested in Proposition 71 partnered with corporate interests in such a way as to muddle who was representing whom and in whose interests people were speaking.

But not everyone at the table was invested in the research, and not everyone invested in the research was at the table. Benjamin shows that certain groups, like AIDS activists, were included in debates though they had little or nothing at stake, while advocates for low-income Californians were viewed as cogs in the wheel and scarcely given opportunity to speak. Benjamin's vivid depictions bring staid-sounding meetings to life, for example, when a woman who is not a "Yes for 71" rubber stamp begins to speak, a reader can imagine a conference room full of eye rolls.

Following several chapters examining various interest groups, Benjamin tackles another silence: why some people reject the medical establishment and refuse stem cell treatment. Like Steven Epstein, Rayna Rapp, Annemarie Mol, Michel Callon and others, Benjamin finds such refusals rich for analysis. Rather than ignoring such a challenging topic, Benjamin faces it head on, powerfully arguing that those who refuse treatments should be taken seriously. *People's Science* demonstrates that many fundamental inequalities in the medical system are not only historical inequalities, but also systemic and persistent ones that will continue to haunt and hamper medical research until they are remedied.

Given that the book's core subject is Proposition 71, the editorial decision to exclude the exact language of the act is befuddling. It would be easier to connect with Benjamin's arguments about the back-and-forth debate over the language of Proposition 71 if the language of relevant sections had been provided somewhere in the book. Additionally, while most science research could benefit from more exploration outside of the lab, *People's Science* might be strengthened if Benjamin had elaborated on what happens inside the lab. Specifically, a more thorough explanation of the science of stem cells would help connect the many humans in her study to the various human tissues that are collected, composed, regenerated, and distributed.

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Despite these critiques, *People's Science* is an interesting and well-written study, not only of the debates surrounding Proposition 71, but also of social citizenship in an era marked by the rise of biological citizenship. Benjamin's final chapter suggests approaches to creating a participatory science in which all citizenship is valued.

Participatory science is faced with imagined communities of the present and future and real communities of the present, all in competition for resources, and indeed, for life itself. Herein lies a sobering reminder that we must pay close attention to how meanings are made. Not only can emancipatory politics and "rights" language be used for commercial ends in the name of "protecting" certain publics, but also the "rights" of some publics, whether medical, consumer, economic, or social, are continually valued over others'. Fundamentally, if we seek to challenge and reimagine our asymmetrical society, scientists and scholars alike must continue to confront the deep and persistent problem of speaking for others.

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