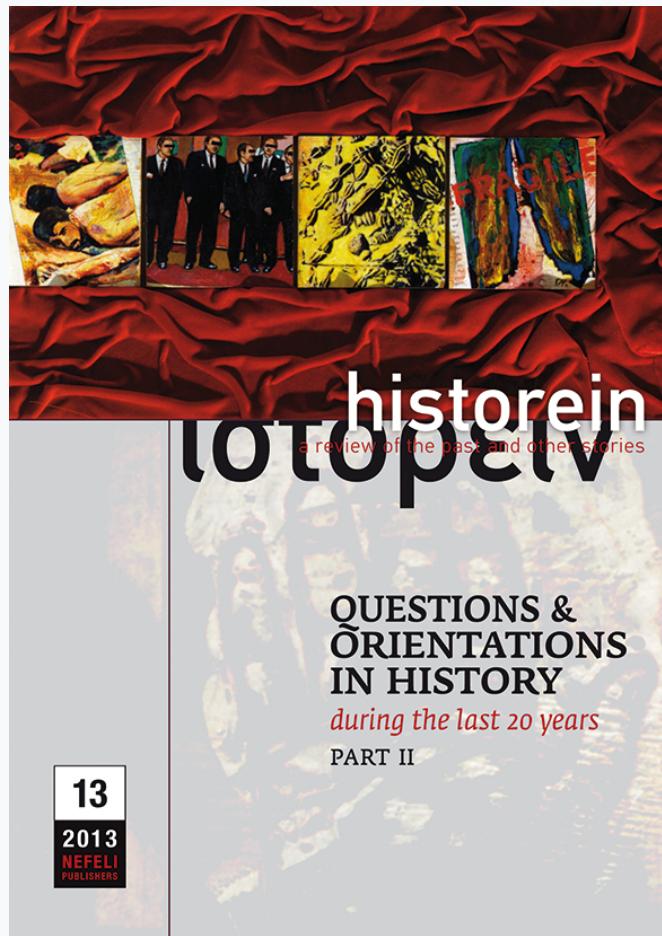


## Historein

Vol 13 (2013)

Questions and Orientations in History during the last 20 years. Part 2



**Review of Nikolas Rose's The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century**

Vasia Lekka

doi: [10.12681/historein.199](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.199)

Copyright © 2014, Vasia Lekka



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

### To cite this article:

Lekka, V. (2013). Review of Nikolas Rose's The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century. *Historein*, 13, 107–111. <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.199>

prove a work of reference for years to come, both in terms of its rich content as well as of its straightforward and reflexive style. By avoiding any type of determinist argument, by opening itself to a type of informed, interdisciplinary free association, so much lacking from our academic literature, Liakos negotiates a safe passage through an immense variety of traditions and debates, endowing the reader with equal freedom to associate and draw her/his own informed conclusions. The result of meticulous study and of an unrelenting desire to highlight the intertextuality of historical discourse as a sign of richness and intellectual advancement, rather than as a danger for some sort of essentialist purity, this is a contribution of immense power and reach.

**Nikolas Rose**

*The Politics of Life Itself:  
Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity  
in the Twenty-First Century*

**Princeton & Oxford: Princeton UP,  
2007. 350 pp.**

**By Vasia Lekka**

University of Athens

There is, it might be said, too much description, too little analysis, too little criticism. Where so many judge, however, I tried to avoid judgment, merely to sketch out a preliminary cartography of an emergent form of life and the possible futures it embodies. And in doing so, not to judge, but I hope, to help make judgment possible. To open the possibility that, in part through thought itself, we might be able to intervene in that present, and so to shape something of the future we might inhabit (258–259).

With these words, Nikolas Rose sums up quite successfully the main purpose of his *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century*. Rose, the author of major works in the field of social sciences, such as *The Psychological Complex: Psychology, Politics and Society in England, 1869–1939* (1985), *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self* (1989) and *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (1999), has done extensive work on a variety of issues, extending from eugenics to the constitution of the modern subject and the links between biomedicine, biopolitics and bioethics.

In recent decades, there has been a remarkable trend among historians, social scientists and philosophers to focus on the relations be-

tween scientific knowledge, power networks and modes of subjectivity. Michel Foucault's highly influential work on madness, prisons and sexuality, along with his analytics of the notion of "*gouvernementalité*" (governmentality) and the various forms of biopower, paved the way for a flood of books and articles. At the same time, recent developments in biomedicine and neurosciences have raised considerable questions about their limits, their uses and abuses as means of control, their role in the constitution of contemporary subjects and their interrelation with the analytical categories of race, gender and class. To name but a few, David Armstrong, Carlos Novas, Paul Rabinow and Hubert Dreyfus have written significant works on the aforementioned topics.

Rose's *The Politics of Life Itself* constitutes an outstanding contribution to the analyses of the current modes of subjectivity and the new dimensions of citizenship, as they arise within the twenty-first-century nexus of power, knowledge, politics, ethics and economy. Already in the introduction, he specifies the focus of his speculations: "as human beings come to experience themselves in new ways as biological creatures, as biological selves, their vital existence becomes a focus of government, the target of novel forms of authority and expertise, a highly cathected field for knowledge, an expanding territory for bioeconomic exploitation, an organising principle of ethics, and the stake in a molecular vital politics" (4). His purpose does not consist in providing a critical approach to the pros and cons of this new biopolitics. Rather, he seeks to explore and map out the possible futures that the "politics of life itself" opens to contemporary subjects.

The book is divided into eight chapters; all of them are based on Rose's previous papers for conferences, symposiums and seminars or ideas, which are further elaborated. After a

short introduction to the main guidelines and purposes of his endeavour, the first chapter, entitled "Biopolitics in the twenty-first century", provides an analysis of the five pathways where Rose discerns significant mutations in the twenty-first-century medical and political perceptions. First, the "molecularisation" of life, that is, the visualisation of life at the molecular level (coding sequences of nucleotide bases, transporter genes, enzyme activities, ion channels, etc.), as opposed to the clinical medicine's body "at the molar level, at the scale of limbs, organs, tissues, flows of blood, hormones and so forth" (11). Second, the element of "optimisation" that operates through the notions of "susceptibility" and "enhancement". Contemporary biomedicine does not seek only to cure diseases and treat ill bodies, but it also focuses on the control and reshaping of all the vital processes of the human body through the so-called "technologies of optimisation". Third, the link between the body's salience and the constitution of modern subjects; that is, their ways of "subjectification". As Rose states, "we are increasingly coming to relate to ourselves as 'somatic' individuals, that is to say, as beings whose individuality is, in part at least, grounded within our fleshly, corporeal existence, and who experience, articulate, judge, and act upon ourselves in part in the language of biomedicine" (25–26). Fourth, the significant mutations in the composition of the so-called "somatic experts". They are not just the old-time classic doctors, but consist also of the huge number of medical counsellors, research ethics, pharmaceutical companies as well as the patients themselves and their families. Fifth, the "economies of vitality", that is, the transformation of human life into a potential source of value and capital. All these major mutations have changed the choices and possibilities of contemporary subjects, for, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, "life is not imag-

ined as an unalterable fixed endowment. Biology is no longer destiny" (40).

In chapter two, entitled "Politics and life", Rose attempts to delineate the new space of biopolitics. He strictly opposes those who identify the new biopolitics with an emergent form of a new eugenics, as he asserts that eugenics' four main elements – i.e., population, quality, territory, and nation – are, by no means, typical characteristics of the new molecular biopolitics. In direct correlation to this, he challenges Giorgio Agamben's notion of "thanatopolitics", arguing that exclusion and elimination do not belong to the practices of modern biopolitics. For Rose, "what we have here, then, is not eugenics but is shaped by forms of self-government imposed by the obligations of choice, the desire for self-fulfilment . . . Its logics and its costs deserve analysis on their own terms" (69).

The third chapter, entitled "An emergent form of life?", is an attempt to answer the very question it poses. Rose doubts whether we are experiencing a posthuman condition. In his view, we are most likely experiencing an emergent form of life, no less human, but even more somatic and corporeal. As he eloquently remarks, "in this sense, our bodies have become ourselves, become central to our expectations, hopes, our individual and collective identities, and our biological responsibilities in this emergent form of life" (105).

Chapter four, entitled "At genetic risk" and based on a paper jointly written with Carlos Novas, examines the new forms of personhood and subjectivity emerging in the age of the new genetics. In his attempt to address the issue of the "genetically at risk" persons, Rose uses Novas' research on people at risk of developing Huntington's disease. Within this frame, he employs his term "technologies of

genetic selfhood" to describe the various ways in which these people develop a "genetic responsibility" towards themselves, adjusting their conduct to this new knowledge.

The fifth chapter, entitled "Biological citizens", is also based upon a joint paper written with Novas. Here, Rose examines the shift towards what he terms "biological citizenship", namely, the orbiting of the notion of the citizen around his/her biological existence. Subsequently, he links this new type of citizenship with a particular form of activism and traces its relations to economy and ethics. He concludes that "in tracing out, experimenting with, and contesting the new relations between truth, power, and commerce that traverse our living, suffering, mortal bodies, and challenging their vital limits, such active biological citizens are redefining what it means to be human today" (154).

In chapter six, entitled "Race in the age of genomic medicine", Rose returns to the issue of race. By exposing several researches and debates concerning the use of racial or ethnic categories in twenty-first-century genomics, Rose asserts that it is not about the resurgence of eugenics. On the contrary, he underlines that "in our present configuration of knowledge, power, and subjectivity, what is at stake in these arguments about human genome variations among populations is not the resurgence of racism . . . it is the changing ways in which we are coming to understand individual and collective human identities in the age of genomic medicine and the implications of these for how we, individually and collectively, govern our differences" (185).

The seventh chapter, entitled "Neurochemical selves", deals with the changing scientific approach towards the human brain; in other words, its purely biological representation, where "the psychiatric gaze is no longer molar

but molecular" (199). Within this framework, Rose turns his attention to psychopharmacology, claiming that even though psychiatric drugs can be used as a means of coercion and control they simultaneously lead to new ways of activism and responsibility, reinforcing the so-called "political economy of hope".

In the final chapter, entitled "The biology of control", he examines the emergence of a new type of biological criminology. After citing diverse case studies of the use of new scanning technologies in courtrooms, as well as the arguments for and against it, he concludes that "the arguments, now, operate within the contemporary style of genomic thought – not in terms of monogenetic determinism but polygenic susceptibilities" (243).

So, what are the main conclusions to be drawn from Rose's book? Undoubtedly, Rose succeeds in providing a thorough analysis of contemporary biomedicine and its relation to politics, ethics, and economy. On the one hand, he underlines the "paradigm shift", emphasising the essential differences between twenty-first-century biopolitics' and previous historical models and stressing the need for the invention of new analytical tools. On the other hand, he highlights the new modes of subjectivity – specifically, of molecular subjectivity – within contemporary societies and stresses the new possibilities, responsibilities and possible forms of activism for the future. To his view, this paradigm shift is most evident in the new ways in which contemporary subjects are viewing, conducting, caring for and experiencing themselves. As he eloquently remarks, "these demonstrate the ways in which those who I have termed 'biological citizens' are having to reformulate their own answers to Kant's three famous questions – What can I know? What must I do? What may I hope? – in the age of the molecular biopolitics of life itself" (257).

Despite its indisputable worth to the understanding of contemporary biopolitics, Rose's book seems to remain trapped within a rather optimistic schema. As he himself suggests, "perhaps this 'biological reductionism' should not be a cause for critique but the grounds for a certain optimism" (255). It is at this particular point, in our view, that the main weakness of Rose's line of argument lies. For Rose gives sometimes the impression that he underestimates the decisive role of the ubiquitous power–knowledge dipole and the diffused networks of biopower within the so-called "advanced liberal societies". Without a doubt, contemporary biomedicine seems to offer individuals a wide array of possibilities and choices. Unlike the citizens of the welfare states at the beginning of the twentieth century, contemporary "biological citizens" have the ultimate responsibility for themselves. But as Rose himself asserts, "activism and responsibility have now become not only desirable but virtually *obligatory* – part of the *obligation* of the active biological citizen, to live his or her life through acts of calculation and choice" (147, my emphasis). Thus, even though he seems to recognise the actual character of neoliberal societies, where individuals are incessantly "forced" into self-examination, self-control and self-evaluation in order to attain the ideal of a healthy, disciplined and productive body, he disregards the multidimensional implications of this new form of biopolitics. For it is this ideal body, which never seems to be as healthy as it could be, that has been rendered the ultimate goal of anyone who wishes to be called a rational, active and responsible citizen at the beginning of the twenty-first century. As it has been eloquently remarked by Alan Petersen, "the terms 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' have become signifiers of normal and abnormal identity; of one's moral worth".<sup>1</sup> It is at this particular point where one can detect the emergence of a new, undoubtedly different, form of rac-

ism. Within this framework, this new kind of universal morality implies more penetrating and dynamic power–knowledge nexuses for the control, monitoring and management of individuals and their bodies, according to political, ideological, cultural and economic necessities. From this perspective, in our endeavour to fully appreciate the implications of the contemporary “politics of life itself”, our task should actually be “to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history’s destruction of the body”<sup>2</sup>.

In conclusion, this book is without doubt a valuable tool for the understanding and analysis of contemporary biopolitics, which fulfils its main purpose; that is, to motivate scholars and “help make judgment possible” (259).

## NOTES

- 1 Alan Petersen, “Risk, governance and the new public health”, in Alan Petersen & Robin Bunton (eds.), *Foucault, Health and Medicine*, London; New York: Routledge, 1997, 198.
- 2 Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, genealogy, history”, in Michel Foucault, *Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954–1984: Vol. II; Aesthetics*, London: Penguin, 1998, 376.

**Christian Promitzer, Sevasti Trubeta and Marius Turda (eds)**

***Health, Hygiene and Eugenics in Southeastern Europe to 1945***

**Budapest: Central European UP, 2011. 440 pp.**

**By Despo Kritsotaki**

University of Crete/University of Strathclyde

Biopolitics, nationalism and the Balkans are the explosive ingredients of *Health, Hygiene and Eugenics in Southeastern Europe to 1945*. Focusing on hygiene – namely the discipline aiming at the prevention of disease and the promotion of health – and eugenics, which centred on the breeding of healthy children, this volume testifies to the recent expansion of the historiography of southeastern Europe to the fields of health discourses and policies. Its editors, as well as a number of the authors, have met at workshops – in 2004 in Budapest, in 2007 in Berlin, in 2008 in London and in 2010 in Athens. Apart from their personal publications on the history of health, hygiene and eugenics, they have contributed to another edited volume, published in 2007, entitled “*Blood and Homeland Blood*”: *Eugenics and Racial Nationalism in Central and Southeast Europe, 1900–1940*, while Marius Turda is the founder of the Working Group in the History of Race and Eugenics, which is based at Oxford Brookes University.

In the first part of *Health, Hygiene and Eugenics*, Paul Weindling offers an overview of interwar German eugenics beyond Germany, showing that scientific and social discourses were not contained within national borders. All the other contributions, though, with the exception of the historiographical last chapter, focus on national case studies. Brigitte Fuchs