

BOOK REVIEW

William Max Nelson. *Enlightenment Biopolitics: A History of Race, Eugenics, and the Making of Citizens*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024. 328 pp.

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As opening anecdotes go, the vignette deployed by William Max Nelson in *Enlightenment Biopolitics* (2024) is difficult to surpass. He begins with a surprising re-evaluation of Abbé Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, popularly known as the author of the defining document that shaped the early French Revolution, *What is the Third Estate* (1789), and the coup of Brumaire (1799) that effectively brought the revolution to an end. In an unpublished manuscript uncovered by Nelson, Sieyès fleshes out a bizarre project to engineer “a species between men and animals, a species capable of serving man for consumption and production” (p. 151). Making “new races of anthropomorphic monkeys” into “slaves” he argued, could resolve much of the tension between one tier of the Third Estate, those “active” citizens with greater rights, means and time to be involved in politics, and the other, comprising poorer passive citizens too pre-occupied by hard labour to exercise political agency. Although admitting that breeding humanoid beasts of burden could be deemed “immoral,” Sieyès

felt such a scheme would solve problems of labour and production, and thereby create a leisured mass political class in France (Nelson, p. 1).

This story neatly frames Nelson's argument, as he looks to complicate our understandings of both the Enlightenment and the origins of "biopolitics." He builds upon the Foucauldian idea of biopolitics, namely the processes by which the bureaucratic state utilizes political power and biological knowledge production to regulate and shape individuals and populations. Foucault argued biopolitical discussions multiplied around 1883 when Francis Galton coined the term "eugenics." Nelson modifies this by arguing we can find discussions of biopolitics and eugenics that pre-date this in mid-eighteenth-century France. He argues that Enlightenment biopolitics took on two threads, which he weaves throughout the book. One was the "exclusion" of those deemed morally or physically undesirable from the "collective body" of the French population. The other was the idea of improving or reworking the quality of the individual through proposed projects of "breeding."

In terms of the base of primary material utilized, Nelson digs into a plethora of philosophes, physiocrats and physicians from Jean Jacques Rousseau to the Comte de Buffon, Sieyès, the marquis de Condorcet and Pierre-Jean-Georges Cabanis. Nelson focuses on French writers exhaustively, and while outside the book's scope, aside from mentions of David Hume, more comparison with biopolitical discourses in other European empires might have proven useful to the more casual reader. Readers could have benefitted from a broader survey that elucidated whether the early roots of biopolitical discourse flowered transnationally or were unique to France.

The book is organised into seven chapters with an introduction and conclusion. The first chapter lays the theoretical groundwork for understanding Enlightenment biopolitics, by showing that it grew from an "organization" theory that was shared by a constellation of philosophers and thinkers such as Georges-Louis Leclerc and Comte de Buffon. Organization theory represented an abandonment of "divine design," instead seeing the bodies of living things as "interconnected holistic entities" that could function by themselves (p. 21). Different parts of the body communicated with and mutually supported each other. Chapter 2 focuses on the development of ideas around selective breeding. It does this through Charles-Augustin Vandermonde's "first modern eugenic vision" to improve humanity by applying principles of selective animal breeding to the human population. Chapter 3 explores proposals to "racially engineer" the population of colonial Saint Domingue (current-day Haiti) in order to discipline labour and promote compliance in both colonial subjects and slaves.

Chapter 4 pivots to look at the exclusionary strain of biopolitics. Nelson argues that "three categories of people (vagabonds, women, and people of African descent in France) were

reconceived as people who should be internally excluded” (p. 18). This was done firstly through campaigns against people of no fixed abode, treating “vagabonds” as subhuman enemies of French society. Secondly laws were passed banning marriages between those of European and African descent. Finally, partly in order to justify the political exclusion of women from the French revolution, Enlightenment scientific thinkers emphasized a biological separateness between men and women. The fifth chapter explores the aforementioned work of Sieyès. Nelson explores Sieyès’ belief that biopolitical regimes of interbreeding in France and “in the colonies” were somehow the secret ingredient that would solve problems of production, resolve class conflicts, and thereby guarantee the gains of revolution to “foster democratic inclusion in metropolitan France” (p. 19). Chapter 6 deals with concerns about the poor condition of the French population, and projects for “regenerating” Frenchmen by changing them physically and mentally, touching upon Lamarckian ideas that changed behaviours and habits could be inherited. Chapter 7 and the conclusion reflect on the contested legacies of the Enlightenment, and the deeper roots of Enlightenment biopolitics.

Nelson accepts that the biopolitical legacy of the Enlightenment has been hotly debated since 1945, with historians such as Naomi Schor regarding it as the first step towards fascism and genocidal eugenics (*Bad Objects: Essays Popular and Unpopular*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995, p. 3). Back in 1947, Horkheimer and Adorno of the Frankfurt school emphasized the tortured contradictions of the Enlightenment, promoting universalist ideas of rights and liberties for European men, while actively excluding both female and colonial populations from their utopian schemes (Mark Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, G. Schmid Noerr ed., E. Jephcott tr., Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002). However, Nelson deftly complicates this age-old debate by demonstrating that what may seem like contradictory ideas emanated from the “same cluster of fundamental principles, concepts, and assumptions” that mutually reinforced each other (p. 3). This had massive ramifications for the future of Europe, as seemingly emancipatory movements had the seeds of racial and gender exclusion “smuggled” in as part of the package. This is represented in Sieyès’ writing. His clear aim was to achieve human political and social equality, clearly a noble goal. However, this would be achieved through the self-conscious creation and dehumanization of a bespoke and multi-tiered slave class, each sub-species tailored to specific tasks and industries. This fresh complication of the history of race, biology and the Enlightenment should serve as an extremely useful toolkit for a wide range of historians of politics and anthropology.

Criticisms of the book are very minor and have only to do with the scope and latter chapters of the study. Nelson largely looks at broader populations, but although he does cite Robert Mitchell, another useful thread Nelson could have included was the discussion

around genius and biopolitics in the eighteenth century. As Mitchell argues, debates about the origin and cultivation of genius “were essential to the development of the logic of biopolitics itself” (Robert Edward Mitchell, “Enlightenment Biopolitics: Population and the Growth of Genius,” *Eighteenth Century*, vol. 59, no. 4 (2018), 405–427, p. 422). Some sense of competing biopolitical discourses in other empires such as the British could also have been useful. In 1763 and 1815 Britain was eclipsing France as a colonial power, and so any discussion of how French ideas of colonial biopolitics could have become transmuted into British debates surrounding their sprawling empire could have spoken to a broader body of literature.