
Epigenetics: a view from social theory

Maurizio Meloni*¹

¹University of Nottingham – United Kingdom

Abstract

Acclaimed as "one of the hottest areas of behavioural science" (Buchen, 2010) epigenetics is in "meteoric rise" (Haig, 2012) in biological publications, and in recent years also social-political scientists have started to appreciate its relevance for the social world. In my paper, I offer a preliminary cartography of the reception and growing expectations around epigenetics in social science/social theory, focusing in particular around four axes of investigation: 1) how is epigenetics increasingly operationalised in social science as "the agent of resolution" (Fox Keller, 2010) of the nature/nurture debate (Singh, 2012)?; 2) how are epigenetic discourses resonant with the increasing emphasis on developmental plasticity in biological sciences, and how is epigenetics expected to contribute to the collapse of gene-centric versions of the Modern Synthesis, rather than becoming "mired in another form of material reductionism" (Lock, 2005)?; 3) how will the rise of epigenetics impact the social sciences with notions like the "molecularization of the environment" (Landecker 2010), "molecularization of biographies", "milieu" and "social position" (Niewohner, 2011), and by making "more effective arguments" about the biological impact of social forces (Miller, 2010)?; 4) finally, how epigenetics, understood as a form "heredity that is possible to influence" (Hedlund, 2011), is expected to change notions of biological responsibility, parenting, and in particular mothering? In conclusion, I will use these four axes of investigation around epigenetics as a case-study where the tensions, complexities, and hypes of the new post-genomic biology become particularly visible, almost an anticipation of a possible future for the bio-social link.

*Speaker