

REVIEW ESSAY

## **Biopolitics in Korea: Theoretical, Empirical, and Practical Concerns**

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Hwan Seok Kim, ed., *Social Science of Biopolitics: Towards the Social Science of Crossing Boundaries* (Seoul: Aleph, 2014) [김환석 편저, 『생명정치의 사회과학: 경계넘기의 사회과학을 위한 탐색과 제언』]

Byoung Soo Kim, *Controversies on Biotechnology in Korea: The Bare Face of Korean Society in Biotechnology Controversies* (Seoul: Aleph, 2014) [김병수, 『한국 생명공학 논쟁: 생명과학 논쟁으로 본 한국 사회의 맨얼굴』]

*Social Science of Biopolitics* and *Controversies on Biotechnology in Korea* are the first two books of a five-volume series on “new politics and ethics of biotechnology.” The two books provide a good starting point to discuss biopolitics for several reasons. Firstly, they provide a well-summarized introduction on what biopolitics is. Selected lectures, interviews, review essays, and case studies help readers to understand theoretical discussions of biopolitics. Especially, the interviews with Nikolas Rose and Bruno Latour show us their intellectual journeys and make their arguments more understandable. Secondly, the collection of case studies is very meaningful in itself. These studies provide various pictures of biopolitics in Korea. In particular, *Controversies on Biotechnology in Korea* sketches the development, use, and controversies of biotechnology with many details of technical aspects as well as social and ethical controversies, policy debate, and civil activism. The diversity of the case studies indicates interests in and needs for good analysis on life as an important subject of politics in Korea. Furthermore, these case studies collectively offer an insight for comparative studies of biopolitics in both western and non-western countries.

*Social Science of Biopolitics* introduces theoretical concerns in biopolitics. The book’s theoretical discussion, which occupies two thirds of the book, implies that

social science of biopolitics can bring new insights by breaking the dichotomy of the biological and the social. Hwan Seok Kim (김환석), the editor, argues that it is impossible to maintain such dichotomy if we want to fully grasp the increasing social and political claims in medicine, environment, and agriculture, because the development of biotechnology fundamentally changed our understanding of and intervention in life. Nikolas Rose's "politics of life itself" and Adele Clark's biomedicalization were mainly introduced to explain biopolitics. Both Rose and Clark argue that the development of biotechnology contributes to redefining life, risk, disease, and identity at the molecular level, and this leads to a fundamentally different form of citizenship, sociality, and subjectivity. What the book tries to point out is the danger of analytical imbalance: social science of biopolitics should be cautious not to fall into reductionism, particularly reducing the biological into the social. Thus, it is important to apply lessons from actor-network theory in order for biopolitics to take a "truly non-reductionist approach." In actor-network theory, science and technology are produced as an effect of a heterogeneous network of both humans and nonhumans such as nature, instruments, and texts. Thus science and technology on the one hand and politics on the other are inseparable as an effect of various networks.

The book's theoretical argument provides insights on the political aspects of increasing scientific and technological interventions in life phenomena. One important insight is that scientists are important political actors. In many case studies of biopolitics, scientists have been less emphasized than patients, people with specific genes, or victims of nuclear accidents, whose life is subjected to the negotiation with the government or pharmaceutical companies. Overall case studies in biopolitics show very well how life, translated in terms of disease, risk, and medicine, has become a very important political subject today and at the same time how sociality, citizenship, global politics, and standardization are shaped and reshaped. But, how do biological knowledge and medical treatments get produced, gain power, and finally become a political matter? In actor-network theory, scientists and laboratories gain political power by forming strong alliances with research subjects, inscription devices, texts, and experiment tools. Scientists translate nature within a well-controlled laboratory environment through experiments, and the result of experiments is translated again to the society to solve various problems. One of the case studies in the book by Gwang Hee Han (한광희) and Byoung Soo Kim (김병수) provides some hints about how actor-network theory can highlight the importance of scientists, along with technology itself. This study follows the process in which laparoscopic adjustable gastric banding (LAGB), one of many surgical treatment methods for obesity, gains power as it is established as a standard surgical method for obesity in Korea. Doctors who formed strong association with LAGB certainly play a role as important as that of patients in the making of discourse—obesity is a disease that needs surgical treatment—and studying, analyzing, and testing various methods and finally choosing LAGB as a standard.

However, questions remain on the book's contribution to the discussion on power in biopolitics. Influenced by Michel Foucault, both theories regard power as an effect, not as a cause or a pre-defined concept. In Foucault's original argument, the modern state gains power by effectively managing life—birth, disease, and death—of its people with various arts of government, while previously the power was given to the sovereign. In actor-network theory, power is expressed in terms of strength of associations. The power emerges from the interactions among human and nonhuman actors. Thus “we should not ask which network has more power. We should ask whose association is stronger than the others.” (p.111) Despite the similarity, their approaches to power relationship are very different. Unlike in actor-network theory, in many empirical studies in biopolitics it is very important to show and to criticize the inequality and asymmetry in power relationship and the consequences. How can the actor-network theory contribute to the discussion of power? How can it help to understand interactions, effects, and conflicts of various forms of power at different levels, from individual to state government? To explore the possible insights of actor-network theory to understand complex workings of power in biopolitics should be an important subject of research to develop the implications of two important theories in social science.

If *Social Science of Biopolitics* is grounded upon Rose and Clark who pay attention to the new possibility of biotechnology, *Controversies of Biotechnology* in Korea has an opposite point of view to biotechnology. In this book, Byoung Soo Kim expresses skepticism and concerns about biotechnology, along with a very good overview of the development, use, and controversies of biotechnology in Korea. This book also highlights the problems of government policies on biotechnology that fail to address various ethical and social issues. By pointing out political issues on ethics (DNA-based surveillance, infringement of human rights), commercialization (privatization of intellectual property), health and ecological risks, and inefficacy of regulations (institutional review board, informed consent), the author argues that citizens should monitor the development and use of biotechnology through “biotechnology surveillance movement” in order to properly deal with these problems.

The argument for the citizen's engagement originates from the author's own experience. As an active member of the Center for Democracy in Science and Technology, Byoung Soo Kim has witnessed and played important roles in major scenes of biotechnology controversies. He is very persuasive in explaining why and how such involvement of citizens should and can be done. In the analysis of the Hwang Affair, Kim provides a vivid description of how human eggs—important research material—were collected and consumed for the research. Despite the Hwang Affair that revealed the serious lack of ethical consciousness, the government continues its support for biotechnology. In this part of the book, Kim describes with amazement how naive expectations were so much alive among scientists, government officials, and the public even after the affair. The description offers enough reasons why public engagement is important to regulate

the blinded policy drive for the development of biotechnology, which has been intoxicated with rosy promises of national scientific competitiveness as well as economic benefits.

The book emphasizes the importance of citizenship in biotechnology. This citizenship is theoretically grounded in the discussions on public participation in science; biotechnology provides good chances to experiment and implement various tools for public engagement in science, such as consensus conference, because of the public's strong ethical and social concerns. The roles of non-governmental sectors in the controversies in biotechnology are rated highly in this book. The enactment of Bioethics Law in 2005, in particular, is considered a successful and meaningful case, where citizens' initiative to regulate science and technology was effectively implemented in policy and law. The author argues that the role of the Center for Democracy in Science and Technology was crucial in shaping the agenda for public discussion as well as facilitating the enactment of the law. Despite some limitations, Bioethics Law became a foundation to regulate the development and use of biotechnology in Korean society. In addition to legislative activities, he emphasizes the importance of the biotechnology surveillance movement, which will reshape the governance of biotechnology—and possibly spread to other technologies in the future. After all, this book suggests that all citizens in the biotechnology era should properly discuss, monitor, and intervene in the ethical and social matters of life.

The development of biotechnology has brought health and disease into the realm of politics, but it is important to remind ourselves that biopolitics is not just about state-of-the-art biotechnologies and genes. One example is occupational disease, which has a long history of politics of life. Health risks at work are now highly uncertain with the industrial changes from simple manufacturing to high-technology industries, and so is the connection between disease and work. But what is still fundamental in the politics of occupational disease is the industry's control of laborers' bodies and imperfect public health system that have less to do with biotechnology. These structural problems in health are often overshadowed by medical research at the molecular level; cancers, for instance, are often attributed to the laborers' lifestyle or genes rather than the hazards at work. Thus it is important to ask what changes and what remains with the development of biotechnology, and how new forms of identity, subjectivity, and citizenship interact with more traditional forms.

To conclude, these two books provide more questions than answers about theories, empirical studies, and practical concerns in biopolitics. The best use of these books will be to take the questions to empirical studies. One thing that is clearly shown in the books is the diversity of biopolitics in Korea. They embody different expectations, concerns, and evaluations on life. Theorization is important, but it should be based upon solid empirical studies that may reveal limitations of existing theoretical frameworks. This is precisely why these two books are

recommended to the historians, sociologists, and anthropologists of science, and why forthcoming volumes of the series are so much anticipated.