

21A.340J/STS.075J Technology and Culture
Professor Stefan Helmreich
Lecture 5: Technologies of Death

THEME 1: BIOLOGY AND BIOTECHNOLOGY

What cultural effects and risks follow from treating biology as technology?

Today, we're looking at technological DAMAGE to BIOLOGY, at RADIATION and its ADMINISTRATION.

Terms we want to think about today, to add to the list we began compiling last time:

BIOPOWER
DISEASE/ILLNESS
RISK

I asked you last time to write up in your own words a definition of BIOPOWER

Let me try to bring this together and tell you about the theoretical concept of biopower, which comes from historian Michel Foucault in HISTORY OF SEXUALITY

FOUCAULT on BIOPOWER

In the nineteenth century, with the rise of the modern, secular, nation-state in Europe — think of France and the French Revolution — sovereign, governmental power came to be exercised PRODUCTIVELY — though the use of census, statistics, programs of social welfare to cultivate the GROWTH of particular parts of a nation's POPULATION.

Foucault writes that a new kind of POWER was in the making, “a power bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them”

Think about programs of sterilization, think about Norplant. These projects are exercises of POWER that reach into the very matter of LIFE ITSELF. Into people's BODIES. The control of population growth is at the center of this kind of power — reaching into people's reproductive, sex lives. THIS IS BIOPOWER.

Technologies of Death: Radiation

Petryna, Adriana. 2002. Life Exposed: Biological Citizens after Chernobyl. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Focus on chapters 1,2,4,5,8.

This book is “a historical and ethnographic account of the rational-technical administrations of the Chernobyl aftermath and of these administrations' economic, social, and biological impact on the populations affected, displaced, or sickened by the disaster” (p. 4).

What were these administrations?

Let sort out, as far as we can, the facts. WHAT HAPPENED?

SOVIET ADMINISTRATION?

Can someone characterize how the Soviets handled the disaster?

"Soviet administrators exploited workers biology as a resource to contain the disaster" (p. 30). The *bio-robots*. People's labor was used to clean up radioactive waste. How is this labor similar or different from the understanding of labor we've developed so far? What is distinct here?

"The absence of a standard measure of threshold dose and its biological relevance has serious consequences not only for interpreting the medical effects of exposure to radiation released during the Chernobyl accident but also for the acceptance of the medical status of that nuclear event itself." (p. 55)

THE UKRAINE TAKES OVER

The Ukrainian government took it as its task to provide social welfare, to correct the *oppression* that Ukrainian subjects had experienced under the Soviets.

"the damaged biology of a population has become the grounds for social membership and the basis for staking citizenship claims" (p. 5).

How?

Explain the specification of the ZONES.

Explain the creation of the categories of SUFFERERS and DISABLED.

What did you make of the stories told by Chernobyl survivors?

WHAT does Petryna mean when she writes, "Scientific knowledge became a crucial medium of everyday life" (p. 19)?

Shifting definitions of illness

ILLNESS/DISEASE? compare SEX/GENDER

In the context of integration into "free-market," and hyperinflation (p. 92), in 1992 it became appealing to be professionally sick. Incentive for health deterioration.

This is where Petryna writes about illness as work.

What does she mean by biological citizenship? What were some different strategies?

Throughout this tale, there are shifting ideas about RISK. And rather than taking this category for granted, we want to think critically about it. How easy was it to really understand exact risk, when the definitions of disease were shifting for political reasons?

So, what was happening with biopower? People in this context have to work to stay biological. Biological citizenship.

What is biopower?

For next time: Genetically modified food. AND PAPERS!