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The Ursula Hirschmann Annual Lecture on
Gender and Europe

Barbara Duden

**The Euro and the Gene:
Perceived by a Historian of the Unborn**



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The Euro and the Gene - Perceived by a Historian of the Unborn

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European University Institute, Florence
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The **Ursula Hirshmann Annual Lecture Series on Gender and Europe** is the annual lecture of the Gender Studies Programme of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies. The series seeks to stimulate research and thinking which link ideas about Europe and the study of gender.

Named after Ursula Hirschmann, who created the group *Femmes pour l'Europe* in Brussels in 1975 as a space to reflect on, critique and contribute to the contemporary debate on the construction of Europe, the series is a reminder of this engagement. Ursula Hirschmann was born in Berlin in 1913, to a Jewish family, and when the Nazis seized power in Germany, she migrated first to France and then to Italy. In 1941 she played an important role in the creation and diffusion of Spinelli's *Ventotene Manifesto*. She married two anti-Fascists and Europeanists, Eugenio Colorni and Altiero Spinelli. Some of her autobiographical writings have been published as *Noi senza patria* (Bologna, Il Mulino, 1993).

The Gender Studies Programme was established at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute in October 2000, and builds on over a decade's work in this field at the EUI. The Programme's general objectives are to support and develop the scholarly work of research students, fellows, academic staff and visitors to the EUI in the study of gender, and to stimulate interdisciplinary work across the EUI's four teaching departments. In addition to the Annual Lecture, the Programme holds regular seminars and workshops organized around various themes, often in collaboration with the departments.

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LECTURE

by

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The Euro and the Gene – Perceived by a Historian of the Unborn

Introduction

This is the second time that one of the Jean Monnet Fellows at the European University Institute in Fiesole has been invited to deliver the yearly lecture named after Ursula Hirschmann. Born in Berlin as a Jew, emigré to France and then to Italy, in 1975 she founded ‘*Femmes pour l’Europe*’ in Brussels and within the ‘*Movimento Federalista Europeo*’ committed herself to the construction of a Federal Europe. Reading and rereading her I was impressed by her sober realization of what uprooting meant: ‘[...] *noi déraciné che abbiamo cambiato piú volte di frontiere che di scarpe [...] non abbiamo altro da perdere che le nostre catene in un’Europa unita.*’ (1993, 22) (‘[...] uprooted as we are by crossing frontiers more often than we change our shoes we have nothing to lose but our chains in a United Europe.’) The experience of uprootedness as a Jew, a Jewish woman and a leftist, and the anxious search for roots runs like a red thread through the writings of women who lived through those years. With deep respect for Hirschmann’s sensitive grasp of uprootedness in postwar Europe, and for the ways in which rootlessness redefines the ‘noi’, the ‘we’ for whom she spoke, I begin this lecture in which I want to go even further.

I choose as my theme ‘The Euro and the Gene’ because I want to focus attention on the bitter taste of dangling in a new kind of exile, a nowhere without precedent that results from the squashing of places, places to stand on, to see from, to root in by the overwhelming monopoly of global, homogenous and manageable space. In my title I presume to yoke two entities that are usually not correlated: the Euro, flagship of a new financial space; and the gene, the emblem of the current lead-technology.

They mirror each other being both critters of groundless calculation, the stuff that defines and at the same time measures the domain within which ‘populations’ take consistency. Both are management tools to establish values, define needs, calculate and modulate risks. Both define relationships that can be expressed only as algorithms while

both have become flags in newspaper editorials. Having made the history of bodily self-perception the central theme of my research for the last twenty-five years, the odd affinity between a new conception of the stuff of which bodies are said to consist and the newly designed currency brought unsuspected insights I would like to share.

My title does not enunciate a theoretical statement but the suggestion of a field of reflection if not an area of research for which the Hirschmann lecture seems the appropriate forum. I am not a geneticist, and much less an economist. I delve in the dark and, at best, in the nebulous reaches of somatic autoception; epoch specific performance of the sense organs and—like it or not—the history of the unborn. My interest is not captured by what new things do, but what they say. I have attuned my ear to what such new words like ‘euro’, ‘information’, ‘gene’ and their like mean in ordinary conversation, whatever their denotation in the board room or in the lab. I consider myself a lay person when the financial effects of monetary policy or the success or failure of gene therapy are at issue. But I do consider it my task to clarify what such technical interventions say, especially what they say to women. I do not want to give the impression that I recommend to an Institution like ours curricular choices focused on research about the symbolic functions of EU policy. I simply use the forum you offer me to call attention to the huge, unexplored, dark side of that moon that is so-called ‘Europe’ and to provide one possible instance to go about it.

Since I have but little time to sketch such a huge domain, I decided to introduce it by one crucial effect that results from the indiscriminate usage of the word ‘the gene’. I want to speak about the implantation of ‘genes in the mind’. I want to reflect on what ‘gene’ ‘says’ to me about whom I am. That’s the topic I am focusing on in my research together with two young scholars, a social anthropologist and a geneticist. We investigate the consequences of ‘gene-talk’ in everyday conversations. We want to understand the meanings explicitly or implicitly imputed to the speaker when he, and above all she, uses this four letter neologism. We want to understand what ‘gene’ says, what it explains, what it commands and dictates, not only when it appears in political debates but above all, what happens to the speaker who uses it in daily parlance. Our ultimate aim is to understand the unique way in which ‘gene’ not only acts as a word but also as a gesture.¹

In today’s circumstances it is near impossible to use the word ‘gene’ without a *reflexive deixis*, without pointing back to the speaker. The speaker’s own constitution, the stuff she is made of, the grammatical ‘first person’, turns into something somehow made out of genes. You cannot say ‘your genes’ or ‘the genes of the unborn’ and simultaneously avoid that the bespoke genes of the other be reflected back at you, the speaker. Say ‘gene’ and you look into a mirror in which you see yourself as the phenotype of a genome; a genome that, in my case, is that of an elderly one that has several decades of extra-uterine existence on its back. This pointing power of the word, its *reflexive deixis*, is the reason why we refer to the every-day gene, the ‘pop gene’ as the ‘reflexive gene’. The gene is not the only engineered entity which has this auto-definitional function. When, months ago, I had to pay in Euros again and again I remembered the moment, two decades ago, when I first

1. The following reflections grew out of a research project at the University of Hannover under the title: ‘The everyday-gene—the semantic and practice-related contours of ‘gene’ when it is used in everyday parlance’.

arrived in Claremont in California, and a colleague said to me, what the banknote now repeated: ‘Barbara, you are a European!’ Truly, unlike Mrs. Hirschmann, until that day in California I had never thought so.

It will now be my task to gather some evidence, largely circumstantial, for the conditions under which the gene-talk of the last decade is of decisive importance for the body-historian for whom I take myself to be. I cannot help observing that from the pop-gene grows a latter-day mythology whose actors are and feel disembodied. These are the points I want to make plausible:

1. Euro-Bureaucracy has given support to the myth by tying the identity of each European to his genetic makeup.
2. Everyday reference to genetics in the media, in school, in parliament and at home is consistent with the general phenomenon of expanding techno-babble at the end of the 20th century. However, unlike popularized references to psychology, communication or medicine, gene-talk leaves direct and inescapable traces on *somatic autoception*, by which I mean the feel of one’s own fleshy presence.
3. Paradoxically the cultural effect of *gene-babble* increases with the fading power of the term ‘a gene’ to denote anything precise in the life sciences.
4. Whilst, at the same time, the symbolic range expands, the creepy omnipresence of the ‘something’ that this word evokes grows.
5. As my collaborator, Silja Samerski, has shown in her analysis of pre-natal genetic counselling, the gene is the Trojan horse for managerial categories of decision-making on the basis of probabilities and risk-calculation which—as all the other educational goals of America’s outstanding business schools—surreptitiously become the norm of self-understanding and action.

And yet, these generative functions of genetics which are chiefly epistemic, go widely unrecognized in shaping today’s culture. Though they are uniquely relevant to my women contemporaries, they are difficult to criticize, especially within the women’s movements. Why is this?

1. The Euro-Gene

The notion that at this moment in history everyday reference to genes not only *manifests* but actually supports, promotes and decisively interprets the ongoing dis-embodiment of women might, at first, seem absurd, or at least sound quaint to many. Ironically enough, gene talk does have an astounding ‘European’ dimension that ought to make it a subject of research in our milieu, here at the European University Institute. In 1988, the European Commission proposed to launch a research program called: ‘Predictive Medicine: Analysis of the Human Genome’. The basis for the European Commission to get involved in genetics was European funding for cooperation between gene-laboratories (France, Great Britain, Germany) on the Human Genome Project. Institutional, commercial and professional interests lobbied for funding of so-called ‘basic science’ as a ‘European answer to the international challenge’ posed by the huge research projects in the US and Japan (Lösch 2001, 111). According to the general guidelines prepared by the EU, this kind of research was a condition for the ‘promotion’ of the ‘quality of life’ of all

Europeans. The Commission drafted this proposal in 1988, and gave legitimacy to its monetary support by referring to the need for research into ‘gene mutations as causes for specific diseases’ with the goal to promote mass screenings of particularly ‘endangered’ populations—those with genetic ‘predispositions’—to identify particular persons, encourage them to change their life-styles, and ultimately ‘prevent the transmission of those genetic dispositions to the next generation’ (Lösch 2001, 112).

This 1988 program smacked of eugenics and therefore it was rejected in the national parliaments, especially in Germany. But none of the parliamentarians, from the right or the left, had the courage or the wit to question the endeavour as a whole. None recognized that it was a highly questionable issue to link the well being of ‘Europeans’ to progress in genetics. Then, after renewed parliamentary discussions, in June 1990, a revised European Genome-Research-Program was launched and this time it was approved.² It bore a new title: ‘Analysis of the human genome’. Allusions to either health-promotion or eugenics had been erased. Instead, however, the introduction now contained a surprising affirmation. It claimed that genome-research is required to foster the ‘dignity of the individual’. It defined the ‘integrity’ (‘inviolability’; *Unverletzbarkeit*) of individual dignity as the ‘right to one’s genetic identity’ (Lösch 2001, 122). By this formulation, the term ‘genetic identity’ was elevated to the status of a ‘right’ and tied to the constitutionally protected dignity of each ‘*Mensch*’. Thus gene-research came to be an integral part of the state’s obligation to safeguard constitutional rights.

Preparing for today I have read these proceedings. Gene-critics, greens, churches or bio-ethics professionals warn against the risks and the ‘misuses’ of gene-manipulation, but none seem upset by the newfangled bond between the ‘identity’ of Europeans and their ‘genes’. A proposal by Euro-Biocrat’s to finance this bonding with 15 million ECU³ went uncontested.⁴ Gene-pros and gene-cons, gene-promoters and gene-critics, all seem to believe in a something to be ‘discovered’ and so-called ‘commands’ to be decoded.

2. Gene-Talk as a Peculiar Type of Techno-Babble

Politicians in Brussels and Bonn between 1988 and 1990 conducted their debates of course speaking in their everyday languages: in English, French, Italian, Spanish, German. They gave no evidence of awareness that ‘gene’ was at that time part of a recondite technical vocabulary whose individual terms, when lifted from their scientific context, became meaningless fragments. By discussing genes willy-nilly they had to betray the trust of the electorate. The observation that Walter Gilbert or James Watson,

2. Lösch 2001, 118ff. analyzes the debates, especially the position of parliamentarians of the German Green Party; the only difference between the first and second proposal for a European Genome Project, according to Lösch, was a ‘linguistic reformulation of the text of the program’.

3. Between 1989 and 1999, the EU’s total investment was more than 80 million ECU to research in the Human Genome, in addition to the money allocated for the ethical, social and legal consequences of genome analysis. As the EU-money is always only part of the total funding, one has to add the same amount in national funding. ‘Research and development’ public spending (1989-1999) amounts to about 132 million ECU (Abels 2000, 95, Ftn.13).

4. The amount of public funding spent on the Human Genome Project is estimated at 3 billion US-Dollars, in addition to huge private funding (Abels 2000, 90).

both outstanding scientists, committed the same type of public fraud in reverse, by coining the image of the gene as ‘holy grail’, the genome as the high road to ‘Knowing thyself’, and DNA as ‘what makes us human’,⁵ cannot serve as an excuse for the politician. They are scientists who betrayed the trust placed in them by society: they use as metaphor a technical term that denotes an abstract notion, and is void of connotations, meaning or sense as a metaphor. I speak here to a public. How can I do so without making another contribution to the confusing gene-talk that I want to avoid?

When ‘genes’ are debated, in Brussels, in Church or in a clinic, they become exiles from their logical domain, which is a modern science. They enter the domain of speech, the domain of traditional semantics where every utterance implies an ‘is’ which in Latin is frankly called a ‘copula’, a mating. By their origin, modern scientific terms are sterile. They are impotent to copulate; they can be integrated or differentiated or be ‘set equal to’ (‘gene = X’), but not wedded to a subject. The standard example is Einstein’s ‘e’ in ‘ $e=Mc^2$ ’ (‘e’ for ‘energy’) is equal to ‘mass multiplied by the speed of light squared.’ This formula is not a sentence or utterance; it does not *mean* that energy is ‘ Mc^2 ’ but that it ‘equals Mc^2 ’. In this way ‘gene’ is also a scientific term, or was one twenty years ago. A gene cannot ‘mean’. Unfortunately, this simple truth is usually ignored by treating genes as semiotic equals to a ‘thing’ that exists, as do bacteria in microbiology, cells and tissue in cell-pathology, hearts and lungs in anatomy-lessons,⁶ or the cooking pots in my mother’s kitchen.

When I use words in a social, ethical or legal context, I do so, inevitably, from my standpoint. I do not engage in Orwellian Newspeak. When I speak, I, the speaker, define what I say with the word of my choice that fits my intent for this particular instance. I say what I know or believe to know. And I demand that the listener make an effort to understand what I mean. In ordinary language we, the citizens, the voters, claim the power to define what we mean with a word when we use it. This is just not so with terms like ‘gene’ and yet, very little research has been done on the crucial question: what happens when ‘gene’ is used in ordinary language, when it is neither used as a technical term, nor as the label for an algorithm, but as a word?

A major attempt to grasp what happens when scientific terms emigrate into ordinary language has been made by Uwe Pörksen, a German historian of language (Pörksen 1988, 1995). He coined the term ‘Plastikwörter’ to name a couple of dozen ‘Displaced Terms’, emigrants from their milieu in a science and exiled into ordinary talk, such as ‘information’, ‘communication’, ‘context’, ‘sexuality’. By crossing over, these expatriates from science take on an unlimited range of associations—they ‘connote’ almost anything—while they do not ‘denote’, do not name anything with precision. These terms

5. This belief in the substantive gene as an ultimate explanation of man’s existence, goes back to the beginnings of the 20th century (Nelkin/Lindee 1995, 39f).

6. Tauber and Sarkar (1992) stress that sequences of DNA do not ‘represent’ a ‘genome of the species’, like images of anatomy represent ideal or standardized parts of anatomical details. In visual anatomy the ‘human body’ is represented, in as much as topological relations between parts of the body and spatial positions of these parts are ‘represented’. Anatomical images do not correspond to a ‘real body’, but in all normal bodies these relations are within these ‘normal’ parameters. This is not so in the Human Genome: a ‘sequence’ does neither ‘represent’ a standard, nor an average, nor a specific ‘piece’ of an individual.

embody an exclamation mark, a ring of expertise and sound ‘scientific’. At first sight ‘gene’ might fit into this linguistic-class.

But there is something more uncanny in gene-babble which stops me from proposing the term to Professor Pörksen for inclusion in his next edition of ‘Plastic Words’. ‘Gene’ has a distinctively alchemical potency, an incarnating power. When you speak about the genes of someone you cannot but hear a resonance of something substantial of the person. I, for one, am embarrassed by this indiscrete connotation. You cannot speak of ‘his’ or ‘her’ genes without presuming to know about something hidden, secret, menacing and threatened in that person. The word ‘gene’ connotes something physical, visceral, substantial. ‘Gene’ invokes non-freedom, destiny. And, further, you cannot speak of her genes without attributing genes to all of ‘us’ and ultimately, inadvertently claim for yourself a ‘genetic constitution’, nay, ‘a genetic identity’. Finally, by each instance with which the speaker points to herself as ‘I’, she disincarnates herself by desiccating her blood and flesh and turning it into a genetic text.

Let us then, briefly, see what the scientists say, what the gene refers to as a technical term. I will argue that, over the last decade in the life sciences, the term gene has become hollow, that it has no precise, defined technical denotation, and that it lacks both an empirical and an algorithmic referent; it is neither a mathematical formula nor a phenomenon under the microscope.

3. The Gene as a Conceptual Crutch in Learned Discourse

In twentieth century science ‘the gene’ can look back on an adventurous career. Already Darwin, Galton and their contemporaries speculated about ‘atoms of biology’. Biologists were convinced that the experiments with peas by the Benedictine monk Mendel would result in proof of the existence of discrete units of inheritance. In 1909, the Danish botanist Wilhelm Johannsen coined the term ‘gene’ to name these hypothetical entities. He did so to sober the fantastic elaboration of Mendel’s ‘Erbanlagen’ that circulated among his colleagues, and he did so in order to stress their hypothetical nature. Johannsen conceptually separated ‘genotype’—the potential for a trait—and ‘phenotype’—the trait proper. Johannsen insisted that these terms were not entities but merely helpful devices to organize data about heredity. Because the transmission of traits was analyzed in a mathematical ordering, their transmission from one generation to the next tended to be conceived in terms of discrete units (Shea 2001).

Until the 1950s the existence of ‘genes’ remained a hypothesis, a conceptual shorthand when interpreting the experimental results of breeding. Then, in the 1970s, when molecular biology could rely on techniques to investigate the DNA directly, the term ‘gene’ came to be used for a ‘sharply limited segment of the linear structure’ that is involved in the structure of a protein or its regulation. However, an increasing flood of findings did not tally with the concept of it as a discrete material unit or segment. It became clear that the concept of the ‘gene’ was not supported by research findings. In 1984, the geneticist Raphael Falk, concluded in an article on ‘The Gene in search of an identity’ that genes had

never been discovered.⁷ Falk wrote: ‘With each new development in molecular genetics, it became more obvious that the gene was nothing more than an intellectual device helpful in the organization of data.’ (Falk 1984, 196). Gene is a heuristic device, a conversational prop, *eine konzeptuelle Krücke*.

In molecular biology it had proven fruitful to accept an ‘as if’. To assume the existence of units that could as well be called genes. But not for long. Disappointed geneticists soon had to forgo the hypothesis of discrete, localizable and functionally definable entities, ‘genes’, and this just at a time when the term gene had immigrated into biology classes, physician’s practices and the term had mutated into a word that landed on the kitchen table. Evelyn Fox Keller (1998, 77) characterized the hiatus, the abyss between the gene in the laboratory and the gene in the daily world: ‘Most efforts to define the gene broke down at that very moment, when the belief in the causal power of genes had reached its cultural and scientific zenith.’

However, so you might retort, geneticists do speak of ‘genes’. ‘Genes’ do come up in the laboratory as well as in discussions with Brussels bureaucrats, funding agencies, bioethical committees and enlightened citizens. True. But what they refer to—assuming that in concrete instances the word means anything at all—depends on who talks to whom, when and where.⁸ What in each instance is called ‘gene’ is not identical. Philip Kitcher (1992, 131), in an article on the concept of gene, therefore proposed the following definition: ‘A gene is anything a competent biologist chooses to call a gene.’

The role of ‘gene’ as a media emblem and as a controversial subject in public debates stands in an inverse relationship to its dwindling weight in the Lab. ‘The gene’ that has become a powerful magnet and catalyst of public attention is what I and my collaborators have come to call the ‘*Alltags-Gen*’, the ‘pop-gene’.

4. The Growing Symbolic Fallout of the ‘Pop-Gene’

The pop-gene, when mentioned, exerts fascinating, literally enchanting power. It is a prime example of a spell-binding expression that works neither as an ordinary word nor as a scientific term but as an incantation that casts its shadow into ordinary speech. This is a daring statement, since magic in contemporary society has not yet become a respectable topic of the social sciences. References to the power of the *fascinosum* in

7. ‘Today’—Falk wrote—‘the gene is not just the material unit, or the instrumental unit of inheritance, but rather a unit, a segment that corresponds to a unit-function, as defined by the individual experimentalist’s needs. It is neither discrete—there are overlapping genes; nor continuous—there are introns within coding sequences; nor does it have a constant location—there are transposons; nor a clear-cut function—there are pseudogenes; not even constant sequences—there are ‘consensus’ sequences; nor definite borderlines—there are variable sequences both “upstream” and “down-stream”.’ (Falk 1984)

8. ‘A casual look at the current literature would be enough to reveal that although the term ‘gene’ is very much in use, it means different things to different people. Some would reserve the term strictly for structural sequences (introns included). Others would prefer to call the whole sequence, related to a given polypeptide, all the various structural and regulating functions included, by the name ‘gene’. Even those who isolate ‘discrete genes’ and engineer them are aware that it makes a lot of difference what they take to be their unit of reference.’ (Falk 1984, 203) ‘Molecular biology is very tolerant; it countenances as many concepts of the gene as the rest of biology may require.’ (Kitcher 1982, 357).

contemporary speech are therefore usually understood as forms of figurative speech. This is particularly astounding in the instance of gene-talk, because this topic exerts a well documented attraction in the media, TV-shows, in school curricula and legal disputes. One of my students, Juliane Stahl, for her MA thesis has gathered five years of editorials and news about the gene in the *BILD-ZEITUNG*: without such documentation I would not have believed what a wild phantasmagoria is currently tied to genetics (Stahl 2003). In my research I do not focus principally on the links of genes to identity, blood relations and inherited traits, which Juliane Stahl and some others have identified as constituents of the 'DNA-mystique' in 'popular culture' (Nelkin and Lindee 1995); I find much more interesting a cluster of surreptitiously induced messages:

- Some 'gene', discovered or still unidentified serves as the causative factor of any human characteristic, behaviour or destiny.
- From the reader of the genome, popular wisdom expects a scientific performance analogous to those attributed in other times to people who could read the future from hand-lines, playing cards, horoscopes, coffee grounds, the *akash* or the I-Ching.
- The pop-gene, almost inevitably, is understood as an entity or a substance.
- A substance which cannot but cause something, a monocausal determinant.
- The invocation of 'a' gene can give to any statement the aura of an apodictic command.

I will briefly comment on these characteristics as they have been recognized in recent learned papers. Already in 1988, Sarah Franklin pointed to the phantasmagorical nature and the fascinating resonance of the gene as an emblem in TV shows (Franklin 1988). She argued—and subsequent studies have come to similar insights—that, within just one decade, the 'gene' has been linked to almost any human phenomenon. Newspaper readers are fed with reports on 'genes for' men loving men, cigarette smoking, boozing, baldness, propensity to cuddling (*Kuschel-Gen*), swelling in the breasts, bed-wetting, disorderliness, suicide, different forms of deviant or criminal behaviour, getting old and decrepit; a gene has even been found for adultery. The German weekly *DIE ZEIT* (26.08.94) asked in all seriousness: 'Does a special gene perhaps drive us to fornicate?' In each instance, this 'gene for', implicitly bolsters prejudices about social behaviour. And the management or control of these pop-genes evoke utopias and promises to 'end all diseases', to overcome death, to live forever.

Other researchers have pointed to the power of the word to foster an epidemic of anxiety, and engender the fear of unspeakably horrible diseases that lurk in one's own body. In an article 'Reading the omens' Margaret Lock (1998) disentangled the complex calculations through which basic genetic research combined with population genetics construct figures of 'risk' for 'breast-cancer susceptibilities'. What made this study so valuable for me is her analysis of the route by which figures of events attributed to a population are transformed into equivalent dangers for individual persons: the route by which statistical probabilities are turned into 'certain' possibilities and then into certainties about actual dangers threatening minds and bodies. Probabilities are turned into an individual destiny. Lock also contends that the pop-gene refers ever less to the past, to heritage and genealogy, and ever more intensely to the future. It works as the omen typical in the age of probabilities and scientific prophecy, as an oracle for each one who speaks of her or his genes. 'This new divinatory space creates a highly potent zone of anxiety, in which the thought of one's genetic heritage (becomes) a ticking time-bomb [...]' (Lock 1998, 9).

Evelyn Fox Keller, the historian of science, criticized the idea of the ‘master gene’ and argued: ‘Instead of the thesis that genes control organisms it is more appropriate to say that organisms control genes.’ (Fox Keller 1998, 80). Fox Keller speaks of an ‘over-determination’ of genes. She argues that willingness to trust in the gene as the powerful blueprint of all life on earth increased proportionally with the demise of science’s capacity to define the thing (Fox Keller 1998, 2001). While school children in the remotest village were learning to recite: ‘the gene is [...] the determinant of all life [...]’, scientists had already moved on. As a result of the synergy of scientific terminology, experimental laboratory practices and social expectations, genes were reconceptualized as dynamic and complex entities. Fox Keller stresses a paradox: from the antiquated ‘determinant’ or ‘master gene’ (one gene—one enzyme), what I now call pop-genes mutate into an essential entity in constant environment-gene-interaction.

Another aspect of what I call the pop-gene was stressed by the Harvard biologist Lily Kay. In her excellent, ‘Who Wrote the Book of Life?’ (2000) Kay analyzed how the axioms of informatics and information theory provided the skeleton of the nascent science of genetics in the period after World War II. ‘Writing’ and ‘reading’ were used as metaphors for information processing. The notion of ‘text’ was expanded to designate a ‘genetic code’ which has neither author nor reader. Kay argues that cybernetics, developed within the military-scientific-technological complex of the after war period, provided molecular biology with a thought style that still colours conversations about genes and ‘genetic information’. The genetic text was cast as nature’s program that provided the apodictic commands that determine the schedule and trajectory for life. Kay’s review of the wedding of information theory and the ‘technology of nature’ is extremely helpful in explaining the simultaneous appearance of odd fragments from successive and sometimes incompatible past stages of molecular biology.

In addition, through my friendship with Heinz von Förster, the pioneer of cybernetics, it dawned on me that to a large extent the fundamental notions of informatics have overwhelmed all other modes of describing natural phenomena: the imperative, the command, the injunction: ‘Stand still!’ The pop-gene, understood as the elementary particle of a command, brooks no contradiction.

Finally, Ruth Hubbard, the Boston geneticist, helps us to understand this ‘command-characteristic’ of the gene even further. She stresses that in ordinary conversations the gene always ‘does’ something: it is active, it implies causal, if not determinant ‘agency’. Genes, Hubbard argues, are always perceived as ‘genes for’ and thus they seem a sufficient explanation for a physical phenomenon (Hubbard and Wald 1993).⁹ When geneticists today speak about the fundamental characteristic of genes as the complex, dynamic interaction of all cell elements, in public conversations the gene becomes the stuff, the material to imply and express a new type of pan-determinism. We might aptly call this omni-functional entity a ‘dogmatic gene’, as does Schwerin (2000). This kind of

9. Hubbard and Lewontin (1996) comment on the pitfalls of reductionism implicit in genetic determinism, e.g. the hereditary (genetic) disease ‘retinitis pigmentosa’ is said to cause blindness. Of two sisters with the same genetic mutation one is blind, the other a truck-driver who also drives at night. See also Richard C. Lewontin (1992).

genetic Joker had ample chances to demonstrate its potency in the birth of the Euro-gene in Brussels from 1988-1990.

5. The Pop-Gene as Trojan Horse for Risk Management and Decision-Making

This is indeed a remarkable parade of properties: a fictional, prophetic, determinant, apodictic agency that sits like a spider in the web of everyday realities. Our investigation of the *'Alltags-Gen'*, right from the start had to take account of the multivalence of the term. Only by recognizing the potentially unlimited claims to meaning of the etymon *'*GENE'* were we able to cut out for ourselves the segment that we would explore: the *'interface'* between its evolving use as a technical *term* and its claim to say something as a *word*.

Silja Samerski, the geneticist in our circle of learned friends, pursues this issue by analyzing the goings-on in professional counselling sessions about *'genes'* (Samerski 2002a). She sat through dozens of intake interviews in genetic institutes in Germany. She recorded and transcribed everything that was said and also noted every gesture. I will draw from her material and interpretations on the *'transgressive gene'*, the gene at the moment when it skips from the world of the geneticist into the consciousness of a patient, usually a woman. Dr. Samerski argues that the *'information'* given to pregnant women by genetic counsellors transforms them: step by step dwelling on the gene disembeds the woman's perceptions and re-embeds her and the unborn child in a new frame. Because the gene is void of any definitive meaning, as an *'Alltags-Gen'* it functions, as Samerski says, like a Trojan horse transporting probabilities, risk-management and *'decision-making'* into the woman's self-perception (Samerski 2002).

I will now focus on such moments at which the term designing an algorithm within one of the many biological disciplines is, literally, *'released'* into the everyday environment and induces a neo-plastic process in the woman's *somatic autoception*, giving body to risk-prevention, decision-making and self-management. In the following paragraphs I indulge myself in the exquisite pleasure of a long term teacher who quotes the pupil who has gone beyond her.¹⁰

I want to tell you about Mrs. G. as she is introduced to her genes, and educated about her personal *'risks'* and enabled to engage in responsible *'decision-making'*. It is amazing how boring and repetitive the transcripts gathered by Samerski are. In rough terms, what happens is this: the geneticist is seated opposite the pregnant woman (and, when available, the presumed father) to begin with a twenty-minute crash course on genes, on the probabilities of birth defects attributed to them, on their ominous supposed predictions about the newborn's future, about risk and its calculation, and on a modern woman's obligation to feel responsible for decision-making.

The counsellor, either she or he, with an MD and four years specialization, informs the client about the number of newborns that are clinically diagnosed as abnormal. He rattles

10. In our research project on the *'pop-gene'* Silja Samerski, a geneticist, investigates *'gene-talk'* in genetic counselling sessions. In the following analysis of the counselling of Mrs. G. I draw on her work on the gene as a *'trojan horse'* for risk-consciousness, risk-management and decision-making (Samerski 2002b).

off some statistical correlations between variables called ‘markers’ and the frequency of certain diseases attributed to some of these markers that occur in a population. The counsellor generally includes a reference to the cytology of stem-cell-development before he comes to any reference to Mrs. G.’s particular risk-profile. She is told about available tests but also, her option to forego testing. The stated goal of the whole procedure is that of enabling the pregnant woman to act as an ‘informed’ and ‘autonomous’ ‘decision-maker’. Even though the counsellor’s crash-course on statistics, on the classification of risks and on genetics mystifies Mrs. G., she will have learned her lesson: she will have learned that genes matter, and that they matter for the future of the child she is expecting.

She is pregnant in her fifth month, and her husband is afraid that something might be wrong with the child because his nephew died from Cystic Fibrosis at an early age. In contrast, his wife, Mrs. G. herself, does not worry. She is confident that all is well. Both have heard about tests for Cystic Fibrosis and to calm her husband, if a test is available, she might as well be tested. After the general introduction, the geneticist supposes that Mrs. G. knows what he refers to when he speaks about ‘genes’. He identifies gene with hereditary disposition. He illustrates the instruction with black-and-white pictures that show little fuzzy worms. He points to these critters and says word for word:

These chromosomes are not the genes, but the carrier of the genes, their wrapping. We humans have about 70,000 hereditary units, genes. They are so minute, that you cannot detect them under the microscope. These genes come in strings and in each of these chains, these sequences, there are, in turn about a hundred genes. This gives you an idea of the dimensions of which we speak.

Mrs. G. thus learns that these ‘genes’ are something that is *here*. Something packaged in the contorted worms to which he now points with his finger. Mrs. G. cannot actually see that something because of its smallness. They could be seen, if they were not ever so tiny and so many. He repeats: about 70,000 she cannot see but about which geneticists know. Then he takes a third step: Mrs. G. must understand that these genes not only exist in her, but that her destiny depends on these minuscule things. Then he starts to enlighten the woman about genes as sources of diseases. Here is how he does this:

Counsellor: ‘Hundreds, nay, often thousands of these hereditary units can fit onto one big chromosome. Got it? O.K. then. And some of these contain mutations in one or the other specific unit. Got it?’

Mrs. G. nods: ‘Mhm!’

Counsellor: ‘Yes? These may very well develop into inherited diseases, Got it?’

Mrs. G.: ‘Mhm?’

The genes invoked by the counsellor obviously do something, they are agents, they can make you sick. Mrs. G. learns her third lesson: something infinitely small that is in you, that you cannot perceive, with which you are born puts you in jeopardy, can make you sick. The idea that people’s destiny depends on their genes is stressed and then, a fourth step, connected to ‘genetic information’.

Counsellor: ‘Just one cell from any body, is a representative sample for the whole genetic makeup. It contains the genetic information of the whole person.’

Mrs. G., this time is amazed; but as always, she muses: ‘Mhm. Mhm’

Mrs. G. is asked to gulp the unimaginable fact that in her innards she carries 'information', that each of the invisible cells of her body contains a number of packages, each stuffed with 'information' about herself; herself now and in the future.

We have to ask ourselves, why the counsellor routinely 'informs' a pregnant woman with this pop-science ranting? Because of the death of her sister-in-law's toddler, Mrs. G. has been motivated to seek a test. What she gets is a lecture on 70,000 hereditary dispositions, some possibly corrupted, packaged in wormlike shapes. As to her husband's fears about the child she is pregnant with, the counsellor tells her that he can indeed investigate her 'hereditary make-up'. It is the interview's stated purpose to provide her with a basis upon which she can give informed consent to tests. What she gets is something even more fundamental: an introduction to a frame of self-perception that is a necessary condition for even considering such a test. The counsellor makes it clear to her what is at stake: Mrs. G. ought to learn about her risks, her risk-profile, her options and how to manage them by cost-benefit-analysis as the basis of informed decision-making. The counsellor therefore introduces Mrs. G. to the mathematical properties of statistical populations. He introduces her to the concept of 'personal risk'. He makes a drawing to illustrate the possibilities of chromosome-combinations of her and her husband's stem-cells. He calculates the random distribution of this chromosomal 'lotto' in the German population. The calculation of probabilities results in a figure: 0,5%. Mrs. G. must learn to handle that number: 'Here you have 0,5% percent for mucoviscidosis. I mean [...] Clear? In a single case, of course, it is a hundred percent. But, this is a low probability.' (Counsellor)

This number does not say anything meaningful about the coming child. To speak of a 'personal risk' of a concrete individual, of this pregnant woman, is a misnomer. Statistical probabilities, *per definitionem*, refer to the frequency with which events happen in large samples, in statistical populations. If 200 women with the probability-profile of Mrs. G. were to give birth to a child, one out of these 200 would be affected, that is 0,5%. The calculation cannot ever answer the question, whether Mrs. G.'s unborn will be the unlucky one, the 0,5%, the mutant, or whether it will belong to the 99,5% without symptoms. Yet, this, and nothing else was the one relevant question that prompted Mrs. G. to come.

In spite of this, the counsellor insists on her understanding her 'personal risk', which is a nonsense concept, a misnomer. He does so, because he wants to make the world of statistics into a guide for common-sense, popular personal decision, action and behaviour. He wants to 'say' something that makes some kind of sense to Mrs. G. even at the cost of being misunderstood. This is a radically misplaced concreteness. He has to speak of her 'personal risk' to give to the abstract notion of the frequency with which events occur in a statistical population, the semblance of relevance for a real and concrete 'danger' to the pregnant woman.

And, finally, to cap the whole procedure, the counsellor warns Mrs. G. He admits that his profession cannot assure her that her child will be healthy even if the outcome of the tests he will recommend is negative. He should explain that if there is a 'positive finding', 'abnormality' does not diagnose a disease, because the test result cannot predict if this child will develop any symptoms at all. Thus he tells her that the test result cannot answer the only questions that are relevant to a 'decision' by the pregnant woman or meaningful to the couple. How, then, will she know how to act? The counsellor does not, cannot, and legally may not, give her advice. The geneticist, in spite of his training as a physician, is incapable of offering diagnosis, prognosis or therapy. The 'patient' around whom the

entire conversation revolves is not yet born. And the only ‘treatment’ that can be envisaged is the woman’s choice of an induced pre-term stillbirth, a late term abortion.

Mrs. G. now has all the information that can be given, the counsellor concludes. She has to decide: ‘I can only tell you what *can* be done, not what *should* be done,’ he insists. Some women I know, in the face of this conundrum have come to the conclusion that this entire myth-making ceremony is ridiculous as well as upsetting. They have had the guts to laugh, to get up and leave. They want to stay pregnant with the child they have conceived and that is now coming; they want to protect themselves from being transmogrified into a risky foetal environment. They recognize that the counselling liturgy is a frame-up; it is so arranged as to make them trade in their coming child as a risky option. The MD leaves no doubt that: ‘You take a test or you don’t; it is you who have to decide, but a decision must be taken at this point [...]’ How can Mrs. G. make such a ‘decision’ facing a range of quantified risks, including that posed by the suggested tests? The counsellor has led Mrs. G. to perceive herself as a manager or actuary. He asks her to weigh risks against each other:

Counsellor: ‘I have told you what I wanted to tell you: it is the parents who have to weigh the decision.’

Mrs. G.: ‘Oh!—Mhm’

Counsellor: ‘Two risks have to be weighed against each other: the risk that amniocentesis will induce an abortion and the risk of the child being born with Cystic Fibrosis.’

Mrs. G.: ‘Hmm.’

B.: ‘You are not obliged to have the test, not at all, because [...] that is something for the parents to decide, especially [...]’

Mrs. G.: ‘Mhm.’

Counsellor: ‘[...] . the mother.’

This framing of a pregnant woman is, of course, absurd. A risk-balancing in terms of costs and benefits can be appropriate if the issue are quantities. An industrialist producing a hundred light bulbs in a day can come to cost-efficient calculations with a cost-benefit-analysis. Mrs. G. cannot possibly find such a solution. For her there is no ‘more’ or ‘less’, no quantities, it is this one child in her entrails that is at stake. But the procedure tells her: ‘Today, you don’t have to accept your destiny, [...] if you do not want it, you can decide [...]’ (Counsellor).

In other words, Mrs. G is invited to deal with her unborn as if it were a bundle of shares or stocks which, according to their chances, are kept or sold. This kind of talk, reminiscent of Orwellian Newspeak, is now a daily routine all over Europe. Within one generation we have gotten used to perceiving the person, the individual as a case in a statistical class and reckoning the future in the frame of probabilities. The session’s introductory information about the invisible, innumerable, unimaginable and yet substantive genes has prepared the client to accept the equally dumbfounding information that the pregnant woman ought to be equipped for her decision-making by a counsellor who does not and cannot say anything about what will happen to her and to her child in the future.

The geneticist specializes in abstracting possibilities from statistics, that say what *could*, not what *will* happen. But what the geneticist spells out to Mrs. G. is a very different thing from the symbolic fall-out of his statements, the latent message that Mrs. G. must listen to and cannot avoid 'hearing' and accepting: the reality of the *pop-gene*. Like her foetus she too has these genes; they are fundamental biological facts that tell something about some kind of risk. To be able to tell her about possibly abnormal risks in her particular case, the geneticist needs to conduct tests. These tests in turn carry their risks, but they are a necessary precondition for her to manage her risk-profile. Pop-genes thus hand the body over to risk-management. Pop-genes locate risk-management in the darkness beneath the skin. Those who take the pop-gene at face value transmute themselves into 'decision-makers'.

6. Why Women? Why Women's Flesh? The Compatibility of Feminism with Self-Management

In reading protocols of these counselling sessions, I am touched by the observation that the women being counselled hardly ever respond. They do not object to what they hear by standing by their own fears and hopes. Mrs. G. murmurs her 'Mhm', in a tone that is sometimes yielding, sometimes surprised, sometimes flustered.

Research about what remains in the mind of these women after the genetic interviews posits that in most of them all traces of memory about risk-figures fade (Michie and Marteau 1996, 107ff, Hartog 1996, Hartog 2000) as do the details of the textbook genetics they have been taught. What does impress them and sticks in their minds are references to 'imminent or less imminent danger', 'high' or 'lower risk' and 'good or bad chances'. Virtually all of those whose interviews Silja Samerski has recorded ultimately opted for one of the tests proposed to them. Geneticists, aware of these outcomes, explain the inadequacy of their own proceedings by ascribing 'genetic illiteracy' to the general population and stressing the need for more counselling (Wexler 1992, 226).

But why, so I ask myself, is it women who make up the majority of those who constitute the main group of customers in this training for risk-management? This question would be stupid, if counselling were restricted to pregnancy tests, which obviously cannot be given to men. But it becomes important once it is understood that women outrank men in educational, parenting, consumer, marriage, and addiction counselling programs. Why?

There is a congruence between the fantasized promises of the pop-gene and the political ambitions of feminist policy goals: empowerment, self-determination, control over one's own destiny and career choice, as well as access to information about diagnostic and therapeutic options. There is an uncanny consistency between the vague promises of the pop-gene and the aspirations of women fostered in glossy journals and spelled out in movement literature. A number of motives have come together in recent years, among others: (1) above all the possibility of controlling not only the onset but also the outcome of pregnancy; (2) the prevention of cancer by very early recognition of premonitory signs; (3) the notion that bio-engineering could correct the physiological handicaps that are perceived as career disadvantages; (4) the notion that genetics better than chemistry would attenuate those aspects of aging that are particularly burdensome

for women. All these aspects are important to understand the penchant of women to seek help for self-management. However, on this occasion I will refrain from comments on this and will concentrate my reflection on just one point: the disturbing and also paradoxical compatibility of feminism with self-management.

Since *Our Bodies—Ourselves*, the best-selling self-help book of the Boston Collective (1972) women's health collectives have promoted the pursuit of one's own health through information about medical alternatives and options, choice and control. As a result of the engagement of lay women in initiatives fostering critical consumption, by the late seventies, professional gynaecology had to abdicate its hegemonic position over women's knowledge and women's bodies. Physicians were forced to change from their mid-20th-century stance that 'doctor knows best' to become the partners in the 'informed decision-making' of their patients (Watkins 1998).¹¹ Thus 'the consumer and feminist movements have created a consciousness among pregnant middle class women that they must control their own lives, that they must assert themselves and make choices—in doctors [...] in treatment options.' (Lazarus 1997, 150).

When applied genetics appeared on the horizon twenty years later, bio-techniques seemed to be catching up with the hopes of the Women's Health Movement. The media began to sell the pop-gene as the ultimate route to 'know thyself' and to control one's own 'biology'. Paradoxically, the pop-gene, which functions primarily as a Trojan horse for risks and limitless dangerous possibilities, seems, as a symbol, to embody progress, choice, control and informed self-determination.¹² Concepts which have been central to the feminist movement are epitomized in popular genetics. In a domain where ultimately no one is in control the pop-gene stands in for a profound paradox in our society: 'The command to responsible, self-determined decision fosters the illusion of individual control in a frame within which the freedom of the individual is reversed and becomes an obligatory choice between programmed options with uncertain outcome.' (Samerski 2002a, 38)

Conclusion

For the last twenty years I have dedicated myself to the pursuit of the body as it has been experienced in the past. The body that shows up in learned papers, the body phantasized, and the body represented in art, sometimes provided clues to the epoch-specific 'feel' I was

11. In her clear-sighted reconstruction of debates about contraceptives Elizabeth Watkins (1998) shows that the 'pill' was the first drug marketed with information on risks and side-effects which were addressed to the client. Feminism had campaigned for the right to act as self-conscious, enlightened health-consumer. Looking back we can see how these claims paved the road to the popularization of informed decision-making and informed consent in medicine.

12. Social science research on what 'women want' from genetics (Browner and Press 1995) makes the following thesis plausible: being pregnant is at fundamentally odds with a modern life-style, as by its very nature it incarnates uncertainties that contradict the goal of planning and calculation. 'Individualized' pregnancy is thus fraught with anxieties. The information about risk figures which seems to make uncertainty amenable to control, fits into a physical and emotional state that by its physical nature embodies an unpredictable future, a 'not-yet'. In spite of this, research investigating why women's bodies served as the public symbol for risk-management is still missing. Overwhelmingly it was women who gulped the information about 'new options' and an 'enlargement of chances for 'self-determined' decision-making with regards to one's own life' (Giese 1998, 45 and Samerski 2004).

after. But I also learned that the very concept of ‘a body’ quite often shrouded the historical object of my pursuit: that which was meant and felt by a speaker who, with the pronoun ‘I’ emphatically pointed back to herself as the one now speaking. That ultimately was my prey. On ‘*herbody*’ rather than on somebody’s body I have laid my emphasis, and, as time went on, the self-perception of pregnant woman almost monopolized my attention: her emphatic assertion of her unmistakable uniqueness implied by her use of the first person singular.

Often it was difficult to speak to historian colleagues about my undertaking, even when I succeeded in making it clear that my search was not a pursuit of what former generations already knew about anatomy, physiology or psychosomatics. They appropriately reminded me of the already existing phenomenological literature involving *hapsis* and *hexis*, the ‘body we have’, or they spoke to me about the felt body as an attribute of the Ego, the biographic self or each person’s identity. Consequently I have gotten used to accepting my project as an ‘extravagance’. But for me, when someone speaks in the first person, she points to a presence beyond words. It is the sense of the exquisite concreteness, the *concretissimum* that is beyond direct grasp of words which I am anxious not to forego. Because the flesh of the *reflexive deixis* by the speaking person to the speaker does not point at something that can be taken for a noun, as ‘the’ ego, ‘the’ self or ‘my subjectivity’.

Against this background it has not been an easy task to prepare myself for this second Hirschmann lecture on the gene. To speak of the gene as a European phenomenon I had to start out from the documents with which the European Parliament in 1990 ruled that the dignity of Europeans demands that they have a right to the recognition of their genetic identity. Does this really mean that by decree, by *ukase*, the *reflexive deixis*, any utterance in the first person singular, will be legally taken as referring to a professionally decipherable text? How else should I, on the basis of my studies on *somatic aperception* in the past, interpret this Brussels ruling?

For the very same reason, I have been forced to reflect once more on my lifetime project of body history (Duden 2002). Whoever says ‘I’ also implies a ‘we’. A difference is indicated but also a commonality. In my research I tried to forge tools which could grasp the somatic experience in every spoken ‘I’ or ‘we’. And my attempts to get at this carnal self-reference I called ‘historical somatics’, the characteristics of self-references for a given epoch and area. With considerable, sometimes vexing discomfort, I was forced to recognize the crippled state of my own sensibilities. From early youth I had been trained to incorporate the slick, gory schoolbook illustrations depicting the female reproductive apparatus. I realized the necessity of gaining distance from these icons if I wanted to make sense of the incomparably delicate language with which women, just a few generations ago, shared among themselves, and in which they complained to their physicians about their flesh, their flows, their aches and joys and fears.

Luisa Passerini’s invitation to deliver this afternoon’s lecture gave me an opportunity to address the global trend towards disembodiment and the deafness of my contemporaries to the richness of old-time languages which expressed the shared *soma* of their times. By putting under scrutiny the keyword, the lemma ‘gene’—and the adventures of *gen** as an etymon—and doing so at the moment of its crossing over from scientific discourse, where it had served as a technical crutch, into the domain of everyday speech—I analyzed the latent functions of ‘gene’ as a neologism. It is this

neologism that in my living-room circle has been baptized the pop-gene, *das Alltagsgen*. It is this lemma (this sequence of letters) that in most instances is neither a technical term nor a sound word that we have made into the subject of a two year research program. We believe that this lemma has all that it takes to be recognized as the kind of entity which social science is willing to attribute and study in past or primitive societies but usually does not recognize as existing in the age of informatics. I tried to show that the pop-gene acts as an incantation. That a lemma today can function in this way is a proof of the arbitrariness and irrationality of public discourse, a fatal atrophy of the epistemic milieu. Language used as a means of communication, managed by the media and detached from real speakers has become the desert in which *magic* thrives.

I have titled my lecture: the Euro and the Gene. By no means did I do so with the intent of comparing the two, but to call attention to the epistemic milieu within which both, as well as the new Europe, are taking shape.

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