

## Scientia Canadensis

Canadian Journal of the History of Science, Technology and Medicine  
Revue canadienne d'histoire des sciences, des techniques et de la médecine

Scientia  
Canadensis

***The Genetic Imaginary: DNA in the Canadian Criminal Justice System.* By Neil Gerlach. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004. 253 p., notes, bibl., index. ISBN 0-8020-8784-1 hb. \$60; ISBN 0-8020-8572-5 pb. \$29.95)**

Suzanne Day

Volume 30, Number 1, 2007

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/800539ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/800539ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

CSTHA/AHSTC

ISSN

0829-2507 (print)

1918-7750 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Day, S. (2007). Review of [*The Genetic Imaginary: DNA in the Canadian Criminal Justice System.* By Neil Gerlach. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004. 253 p., notes, bibl., index. ISBN 0-8020-8784-1 hb. \$60; ISBN 0-8020-8572-5 pb. \$29.95)]. *Scientia Canadensis*, 30(1), 121–123. <https://doi.org/10.7202/800539ar>

***The Genetic Imaginary: DNA in the Canadian Criminal Justice System.* By Neil Gerlach.** (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004. 253 p., notes, bibl., index. ISBN 0-8020-8784-1 hb. \$60; ISBN 0-8020-8572-5 pb. \$29.95)

Sociological inquiry often necessitates the use of critical historical analysis to tease out questions about the taken-for-granted conditions of contemporary life. This is the approach that sociologist Neil Gerlach undertakes in *The Genetic Imaginary: DNA in the Canadian Criminal Justice System*. Of interest to scientific historians and sociologists alike, the main questions this work posits are: how do we tend to view the use of genetic science in the criminal justice system? What social, political, and technological developments have contributed to the construction of these various attitudes and meanings? What are the resulting implications for thinking about crime and criminality? Gerlach's attempt to address these questions is presented in a coherent introductory analysis of the social processes that have shaped current applications, policies, and representations of deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) technology in the criminal justice system.

Focusing on the Canadian socio-legal landscape, Gerlach's investigation seeks to uncover traces of the "genetic imaginary." He explains it as "a set of social concepts for thinking and speaking about the civilization of the gene and its future direction" (p. 5). We are introduced to a number of valuable concepts immediately within the first chapter which assist in structuring the study's critical approach. Gerlach begins by asserting that, within a risk society of heightened social control and an eroded sense of public security, biogovernance arises as a state strategy for negotiating the risks of biotechnology. In exploring this strategy, Gerlach broadens the scope of his analysis to consider not only changes within legal policy that create and sanctify a place for genetic technology in the criminal justice system, but also shifts in legal discourse, media representations, industry practices, and concepts of crime, governance, and justice.

Herein lies the great strength of Gerlach's offering; moving beyond a strictly archival account of changes to Canadian policy, he invites us to consider the fascinating diverse and intersectional forces that shape our apparent acceptance of genetic technology as a "tool of justice." Organizing such a project would seem no easy task, but the topic divisions and appropriate ordering of material within *The Genetic Imaginary's* chapters are indicative of Gerlach's successful efforts in meeting this challenge. He contextualizes the historical background of DNA technology within the criminal justice system from three angles (chap. 2): the technological context, developments within crime technology leading up to present genetic science; social context, changing public views of crime/victimization and surveillance; and legal context, a timeline of policy changes and the institutional debates that shaped them. These contexts are presented for the sake of describing the emergent discourse within each, ensuring that the significance of events, developments, and conflicts continually reference the original concern with representation and meaning.

Gerlach continues to develop this concern (chap. 3). In exploring the discourse of legal and political debate around DNA warrants and Canada's National DNA Data Bank, Gerlach notes that genetic science in the courts has been represented as an issue in need of limitation and management, precluding consideration as to whether DNA technology has a place in criminal justice at all. Finally Gerlach develop a critical position from which we may begin to address DNA technology in a way that moves beyond a complacent, management-only orientation. Precisely he discuss the media coverage of the highly publicized cases of Guy Paul Morin and David Milgaard (chap. 4), the laboratory methods and state/industry practices (chap. 5), and the changing concepts of justice (chap. 6). We are reminded of what is at stake in neglecting to do so: by concluding with a disconcerting speculation on the future form of criminal justice, Gerlach emphasizes the implications biotechnological discourse has for potential genetic-based concepts of the individual, criminality, and practices of justice.

It would be a mistake to assume that the focus on tracing the "genetic imaginary" through an analysis of representation, narrative and discursive framework will leave the reader struggling to digest an overabundance of social theory. On the contrary, the explanatory theory, although quite diverse, is only briefly presented—indeed, almost to a fault. This brevity is arguably necessary given the ambitious number of perspectives addressed in this book, but is also potentially an unfortunate limitation; readers who have had very little exposure to sociological theory may not be entirely satisfied by the explanation of concepts and perspectives, and

those who were hoping to find a more detailed explanation of specific theoretical approaches may be disappointed in the lack of theoretical expansion. As such, this reviewer finds that Gerlach's efforts to demonstrate the diversity of issues that arise from a discussion of DNA and the criminal justice system serve more as a broad, cohesive introduction rather than providing in-depth, exhaustive theoretical explanation.

Clarity and richness of detail are well attended to in other respects, however. For instance, readers who are not familiar with the mechanical workings of DNA technology are treated to straightforward explanations of this process, including the technique of DNA identification (chap. 2) and the laboratory method of processing DNA samples within Canada's National DNA Data Bank (chap. 5), which this reviewer certainly appreciated as an effective way to demystify the "charismatic science" of genetic expertise. The author also does an admirable job of engaging the reader by recounting details of relevant Canadian criminal cases, presenting not only media accounts, but also discussion of historical differences in proceedings and strategies coinciding with the DNA technological development "timeline."

Neil Gerlach's analysis of DNA technology in the Canadian criminal justice system ultimately serves to expose the historical social processes behind contemporary ways of thinking about and making use of genetic science. The true value of his work is the range of scholarly interests that are captured by the analysis, and sociologists and historians of scientific technology alike can certainly identify with his underlying argument that "new technology does not simply move from the research laboratory directly into practical application. It must first pass through a social context of existing power relations and structures of meaning" (p. 7). *The Genetic Imaginary* is a thoroughly enjoyable and thought-provoking offering; although introductory in nature, its Canadian historical focus serves as an important precursor to further socio-legal, ethical, and political critique.

SUZANNE DAY  
*Queen's University*