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Review Symposium: A tale full of sound and fury but what does it signify?

Roderick D. Buchanan, *Playing with Fire: The Controversial Career of Hans J. Eysenck*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. ISBN 978-0-19-856-6885. 475 pp. £34.95; US\$65.

Hans Jürgen Eysenck is by far the best known British psychologist of the post-Second World War period. His most significant contribution to the discipline is generally thought to be his three-factor dimensional theory of personality which is still taken seriously today, even though it is 60 years old. From an institutional point of view, he played a major role in establishing clinical psychology in the UK, even though he was not a practitioner himself. He also wrote a series of popular books on psychology that were addressed to the general public.

The adjective ‘British’ has to be used with some qualification since he was born in Germany and came to the UK in 1934 at the age of 18. He subsequently studied psychology at University College London where he was immersed in a tradition of psychology that dated back to Francis Galton and which had been subsequently developed by figures such as Karl Pearson, Charles Spearman and Eysenck’s mentor, Cyril Burt. Eysenck’s approach to psychology was thoroughly British and so the adjective is not misplaced.

If there is one word that people associate with Eysenck, it is not ‘British’ but ‘controversial’. This word is contained in the title of the book and some of the chapter headings. The controversy surrounding Eysenck probably reached its height in the 1970s when he entered the debate over race and IQ and was famously attacked by radical students at the London School of Economics while giving a guest lecture. There were similar incidents at the University of Sydney and elsewhere. Eysenck had already become a controversial figure early in his career when he used statistics from insurance companies to suggest that psychotherapy was no better than no treatment and psychoanalysis was even worse. Needless to say, the professionals who earned their living from these practices were less than impressed. He also entered the debate over the authoritarian personality, arguing that authoritarianism was not just a feature of right-wing politics, as Adorno and his

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colleagues had suggested. It was a characteristic of left-wing politics as well. Eysenck even managed to be controversial in his twilight years when he disputed the link between smoking and cancer and was generously rewarded by the tobacco industry for doing so. He suggested that the most important factor in causing cancer was personality, though he had little evidence to back it up.

There can be few figures in the history of science whose biographies are as interesting and this particular biography was planned soon after Eysenck's death in 1997. It was conceived by Maarten Derksen and Trudy Dehue of the University of Groningen in the Netherlands who successfully applied to the Wellcome Trust for funds and then advertised for a post-doctoral Fellow to do the research. The author was chosen from those who applied. Presumably one or both of these figures had a hand in supervising the work.

The author begins with a spirited defence of the genre of biography which, he says, was thought by many people in the 1970s to be passé as far as the history of science is concerned. He says that he finds it understandable, given the 'hagiographies and hatchet jobs' that were on offer, but claims that biography is making a comeback and that it is a good thing. What is he going to offer as an alternative to these hagiographies and hatchet jobs? The principle of symmetry as outlined by David Bloor (1976) in his strong programme for the sociology of science. According to this principle, the author should stay neutral with respect to scientific controversies so that the views of both sides can be understood and explained.

First of all, I would not be so quick to dismiss the criticisms of biography that have been made. Science is a social institution and it is the social aspects of science that tend to be overlooked with our excessive focus on individual scientists. It is a particular problem in the history of psychology where textbooks often contain a succession of biographies and many of the monographs that are produced are of this type. It is a manifestation of the individualistic culture in which we live and of the role that psychology plays in promoting that culture. As for the principle of symmetry, it seems to have been forgotten somewhere along the way since the book is quite literally peppered with evaluations of Eysenck and his work and these are usually of a critical nature. We are told, for example, that 'critic after critic noted that the heritability of within-group differences *could not and should not* be extrapolated to between-group differences. In fact, there was no logical connection between the two' (289–9; original emphases). There is already a clue on the first page to suggest that the book is not as neutral as the author claims. It contains a statement by Eysenck's widow, Sybil: 'The views expressed in this book are not shared by me'. Presumably this was a condition of her cooperation. The book has also managed to raise the hackles of Eysenck's Canadian acolyte J. Philippe Rushton (2011) who has written a scathing review of it for *Personality and Individual Differences*, a journal which Eysenck founded and which is currently coedited by Sybil Eysenck. One might argue that Rushton would not have been happy with anything less than hagiography but it is unlikely that a neutral account would have led to such a response.

I am not suggesting that it is bad history because of this. In his book on race, racism and psychology, Graham Richards (1997) states that it is virtually impossible for anyone to be neutral with respect to these issues and outlines his biases at the start. There is of course a long tradition of doing this in the social sciences. It is predicated on the view that we all have our biases and being honest about them is better than pretending that

they do not exist. Quite apart from the issue of whether we can stay neutral in these matters, there is the issue of whether we ought to do so. Failing to take a stand against views and actions which lack credibility and/or are morally repugnant might be seen as an abrogation of responsibility.

The main part of the book contains a detailed account of Eysenck's career. His background in Germany is explored to the extent that it is possible. There is a lengthy discussion of why Eysenck moved to the UK. He always maintained that it was because he was opposed to Nazi ideology and vigorously denied that he was Jewish. It was only in later years that he acknowledged his substantial Jewish ancestry and claimed somewhat incredulously that he had not known about it before. Had he done so earlier, his decision to leave might have been seen as an act of self-interest rather than a principled stand. The book then moves on to Eysenck's student years. He is described as 'an accidental psychologist' because of the story that he often told of how he wanted to become a physicist but was prevented from doing so because of differences between the German and British educational systems. One had to have done a significant amount of science in school in order to be allowed to study science at a British university and Eysenck had largely concentrated on the humanities. He was told that psychology was the only 'science' that was available to him and so he reluctantly decided to study it instead. There are then two chapters on Eysenck's work in the field of personality, the second of the two specifically on how he tried to give a biological basis to the field. The next chapters cover his work in the area of clinical psychology, political psychology, race and IQ, and smoking and cancer. The book ends with a short chapter titled 'Conclusions'.

As might be expected, an important topic in the final chapter is why Eysenck was such a controversial figure. We are told that he saw science in competitive terms and that there would inevitably be winners and losers. His style was that of the lawyer who selectively provided evidence to support his own case. He is also said to have deliberately sought the limelight and the attention that it brought. When he entered the controversy over race and IQ in 1971, he had never conducted any research in the field and relied heavily on the work of Arthur Jensen. Apart from his personal friendship with Jensen, there was no particular reason for him to become involved. The author also points out that Eysenck paid close attention to his citation counts, boasting in his memoirs that no other British psychologist came close to him and the only comparable figures were people like Skinner and Freud. As far as the smoking and cancer issue is concerned, it was money from the tobacco industry that enabled him to continue with his research after he retired. Eysenck openly acknowledged this support, though not the full extent of it, and claimed that it did not influence his results.

Eysenck maintained throughout his career that he was a dispassionate scientist who was only interested in the facts and that his opponents were politically motivated. Unfortunately the author seems to have taken Eysenck's statements on this subject at face value: 'He was too self-absorbed, too preoccupied with his own aspirations as a great scientist to harbour specific political aims' (324). Given his public position, Eysenck understandably kept his political cards close to his chest but they were as conservative as one might expect on the rare occasions that he displayed them. For example, he supported the Thatcher government during the miners' strike of the 1980s, referring to the miners' leaders as 'fascists of the left' (357). He seemed to take great delight in

baiting the left and pretended to be powerless when Michael Billig and others pointed out to him that his views on race and IQ were giving encouragement to the far right. It was because Eysenck seemed to have such an affinity with the far right that doubts were expressed, correctly it seems, over his oft-repeated claim that he had left Nazi Germany on purely political grounds. Of course none of this 'proves' that Eysenck had a political agenda but it does show that his views were consistently in accord with those on the right wing of the political spectrum. Perhaps the important issue here is not Eysenck's motives, a notoriously difficult thing to prove, but the influence that his work had in the wider society. This may be a good example of how biography can lead us astray.

The book is a very scholarly piece of work. The author has left no stone unturned in his quest for information. Archives in several countries were consulted, interviews with many people were conducted over a period of 7 years and an extensive correspondence was carried out. The author has also read a great deal. The copious references in the footnotes are a testament to that. There is a limitation in that no personal and professional papers were consulted since Eysenck's widow had them destroyed in the immediate aftermath of her husband's death, presumably on the instructions of Eysenck himself.

I was slightly disappointed to learn that a significant portion of Eysenck's work would not be covered in the book. This includes his work on crime and personality, astrology and parapsychology, and genius and creativity. The author's explanation for these omissions is somewhat surprising. He says that history is often determined by the availability of source material. Given that there is little archival material on Eysenck, he could have used interviews and public sources to examine them, as he does elsewhere. Then again, I can feel some sympathy for him. The book as it stands is a substantial tome of nearly 500 pages and it would have been even longer if he had covered some or all of this work. Perhaps he could examine this material in the future in order to provide a more comprehensive account.

Something less obvious that I felt was omitted from the work was a convincing explanation of Eysenck's popularity. He was showered with honours and awards. The American Psychological Association gave him its Award for Distinguished Contributions to Science (1988), a Presidential Citation for Outstanding Contributions to Psychology (1994) and a Centennial Award for Lifelong Contributions to Clinical Psychology (1996), while the American Psychological Society gave him its highest honour, the William James Award (1994). Five Festschriften were devoted to him. Towards the end of his life, he was the most cited living psychologist in the world. He is said to be the third most cited psychologist of all time after Freud and Piaget (Rushton, 2001). There is a touching story of the last conference that Eysenck attended. He was in a wheelchair and tried to remain anonymous at the back of the hall. However, word of his presence got around and the audience spontaneously rose to give him a standing ovation. How do we explain the high esteem in which he was held?

My guess, and it is only a guess, is that although Eysenck was a fractious individual who often engaged in fights with other psychologists, he was a tireless warrior on behalf of psychology itself. The series of popular books that he wrote helped to raise the profile of psychology in the wider society. There are many people with degrees in psychology,

myself included, whose initial acquaintance with the subject was through these books. The furore over race and IQ went even further in raising the public profile of psychology. Eysenck wrote for popular magazines as diverse as *Reader's Digest* and *Penthouse* and was a regular feature on radio and television, both in Britain and elsewhere. For many people, he was 'Mr. Psychology' and he was often recognized by taxi drivers, shop assistants and the like.

Of course many uninformed members of the public tend to identify psychology with Freud and Eysenck insisted, along with the majority of psychologists, that psychology was a science and psychoanalysis was not. He eagerly embraced the views of fellow émigré Karl Popper who claimed that psychoanalysis was not a genuine science because its theories were unfalsifiable. In his own work, he claimed to use a 'scientific' approach and the story of how he really wanted to be a physicist was all part of that. He also constantly tried to relate his theories to the more prestigious discipline of biology. However, as Eysenck's son Michael has recently acknowledged, some of Eysenck's speculations were no less grandiose than those of Freud (M. Eysenck, 2010). In the background to all this was a turf war between psychiatry and psychology. Eysenck's claim that psychotherapy was useless at best and worse than useless at worst was part of an attempt to carve out a niche for psychology since it was generally psychiatrists who provided this kind of treatment. Eysenck advocated behaviour therapy which was offered almost exclusively by psychologists. There are several historical studies which suggest that the first loyalty of many psychologists is to psychology itself and anyone whose first loyalty is to psychology has much to be grateful to Eysenck for.

In spite of these reservations, the book is a valuable contribution to the literature on the history of psychology. Until now, we have only had the different versions of Eysenck's autobiography (e.g. H. J. Eysenck, 1980, 1997) and a biography by Tony Gibson (1981) which Eysenck endorsed. There was room for a more critical account of Eysenck's life and work and this book has provided exactly that. The author might have set out to provide a neutral account of his subject matter but his failure to do so has resulted in a much better book.

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Biographical Note

Adrian C. Brock is a lecturer in Psychology at University College Dublin. After studying Psychology in Manchester and History and Philosophy of Science in Cambridge, he moved to Toronto to do his PhD with Kurt Danziger. He is on the editorial boards of journals such as *History of Psychology* and the *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology* and a history adviser to the Organizing Committee of the XXX International Congress of Psychology in Cape Town in 2012. He will give a keynote address to the Canadian Psychological Association at its annual meeting in Toronto in 2011.