

The Controversialist as Scientific Persona

Review of

Playing with fire: The controversial career of Hans J. Eysenck.

By Roderick D. Buchanan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

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In *Playing with Fire*, Roderick Buchanan offers an engagingly written and judicious analysis of the scientific career of Hans J. Eysenck. As the author notes, the book reflects a renewed interest among historians of science in the genre of biography. This new wave of scientific biography eschews both hagiography and muckraking in favour of using the narrative structure provided by a single life to bridge the social and the intellectual. The story of Eysenck's career is inseparable from the status of psychology as a therapeutic profession and a public science in postwar Britain. He shaped the fields of clinical psychology, psychometrics, and personality theory. Outside of psychology, he is better remembered for the controversies he seemingly engendered, especially, though not exclusively, over the connection between race and intelligence during the 1970s. Buchanan's object is precisely the contentious nature of this career. How do Eysenck's theoretical contributions, his popular science writing, and his highly publicized disputes fit together into a coherent picture of a life in science?

Buchanan offers an intriguing answer. Eysenck simultaneously advocated a highly quantified and depersonalized vision of objectivity to root out pseudoscience and produced a public science whose expository structure ensured that the reader was largely dependent upon the author's expert judgment of the evidence. In the pursuit of controversy for controversy's sake, Eysenck failed to abide by his own philosophy of science. His hyper-individualistic desire to best his opponents undercut his commitment to the demands of objectivity as a communal virtue. Quantification became a strategically deployed tool rather than an exacting standard which governed all his activity. For Buchanan, this contradiction forms the essence of Eysenck's scientific persona.

Though the book wears its theoretical apparatus lightly (it mostly appears in footnotes rather than the body of the text), recent work in the history and sociology of science informs the analysis. Buchanan brings together a version of historical epistemology (which addresses what epistemic virtues underscored Eysenck's vision of science) and the public understanding of science (which takes seriously the role of popularization and examines what effects it has on disciplinary science). I found Buchanan's concept of the "controversialist" a useful analytic for understanding the history of psychology as a public science. This is a style of self-fashioning which involves embracing heterodox positions as an emblem of the scientist's individuality and renders scientific dispute into a game in need of winning at any cost. The controversialist bemoans the politically correct dogmas of the mediocre masses. The psychologist as a manly, debunking sceptic has served a crucial strategy for

proclaiming one's disinterestedness while seemingly engaging in politicized topics from the popular science writing of Hugo Münsterberg and Joseph Jastrow to today's Evolutionary Psychologists. The cultivation of this persona often frustrates even those sympathetic to elements of these public intellectuals' larger projects.

Fittingly, considering his analytic goals, Buchanan organizes his book around a sequence of controversies that takes the readers through Eysenck's life. The first chapter deals with Eysenck's childhood in Germany and the question of his partial Jewish heritage, a topic of heated debate in light of his position in the IQ controversy. The second chapter discusses his education at University College London (UCL). This chapter contains a tremendous amount of fascinating material. By juxtaposing it with the research style practised at Cambridge, Buchanan makes clear Eysenck's profound debt to the tradition of correlational and quasi-naturalistic psychology particular to UCL. Cyril Burt mentored him not only in factor analysis, but in a rhetorical style that put a premium on winning disputes even in the absence of entirely convincing evidence. Buchanan makes clear how Eysenck paradoxically distrusted yet emulated Burt's duplicity.

Chapters four through six are devoted to Eysenck's work on personality theory and behavioural therapy, the areas where he had the greatest impact on contemporary psychology. There is a persistent theme in these chapters: Eysenck's advocacy of measurement to undercut the clinical judgment of psychoanalytically inclined psychiatrists. Buchanan shows the debts the three factor model of personality owed to the institutional setting of the Maudsley Hospital where Eysenck modelled a universal theory of human nature on this clinical population.

Chapter seven discusses the reception of Eysenck's 1950s political psychology which set the stage for the remainder of his career. He rejected the postwar consensus that the social scientist's role was a liberal one dedicated to reducing human conflict and eliminating prejudice. He was sceptical of the existence of a uniquely right-wing authoritarian personality, arguing that Communists and other leftist groups exhibited an indistinguishable tough-mindedness. The spectre of left-wing Fascism was the most acute threat for Eysenck and he saw the popular rejection of his superior expertise during subsequent controversies as confirmation of this belief.

Unsurprisingly, Buchanan devotes his longest chapter to the IQ controversy. In 1971, Eysenck published a popular book supporting the claims of Arthur Jensen about the hereditary basis for racial differences in IQ. It was the most volatile controversy of Eysenck's career and one that largely solidified his reputation outside the discipline as a public intellectual of the new right. I cannot do justice to the detail and subtlety of Buchanan's analysis as he parses the claims of the various partisans with cutting symmetry. Buchanan argues that Eysenck had a rather shallow commitment to the genetics of racial differences by demonstrating how marginal the topic was to his psychometric research prior to 1970. He concludes that Eysenck's intellectual pursuits were too varied and his persona too individualistic for the crypto-Nazi charge to stick. On the other hand, he finds that Eysenck was insensitive to and wilfully negligent about the use that the National Front and others made of his claims.

The final substantive chapter deals with Eysenck's late in life interest in the links between personality traits and cancer. The notoriety and marginality Eysenck acquired due to his stance in the IQ controversy made the lucrative patronage of the tobacco industry particularly appealing. Buchanan doubts that tobacco money greatly influenced the outcome of Eysenck's research, but it certainly affected what projects he investigated. Moreover, he allowed himself to be used in the legal defence of the industry from its private and governmental opponents. A distinct pattern in the

political choices Eysenck made emerges. Faced with uncertain and ambiguous evidence, he consistently privileged heterodox views which undermined the liberal consensus.

Because so much of Eysenck's career was pursued at the level of popular science, I was curious about how the use of publishers' archives may have augmented the analysis offered. Historians of Victorian popular science have mined these kinds of records to trace how scientific works were marketed and consumed. This move would further decentre Eysenck from the narrative and focus on how a variety of readers made use of his science.

In his review of this excellent book, Michael Eysenck declared that it was the "definitive" biography of his father. I disagree in so far as definitive implies closure and I seriously doubt this book will end the debate over Eysenck. Buchanan himself concludes that there can be no final word on such a controversial career. Instead, Buchanan has provided an inspiring framework that should shape not only future Eysenck scholarship but the history of psychology as a public science.

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