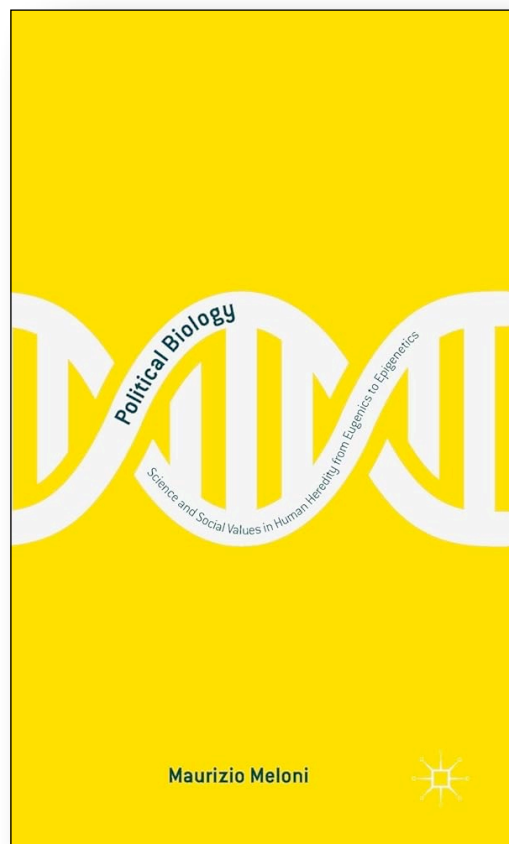


## Book Review

*Maurizio Meloni. Political Biology: Science and Social Values in Human Heredity from Eugenics to Epigenetics. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 284 pp.*

This short volume demonstrates that there are few better examples of the complex relation between the practice of science and its influence both on and by politics than the development of genetic research in the interval between the confirmation of Gregor Mendel's laws of particulate inheritance in 1900 to acceptance of the Modern Evolutionary Synthesis in the years following World War II. It's a case that has been made before, but rarely with the eloquence, passion, and focus Maurizio Meloni brings to the task. His review dwells on the efforts made by many prominent biologists to advocate eugenic social policies that confirmed prejudices and assumptions on both the right and left of the political spectrum. However, in his rush to demonstrate how mired in the web of their personal political views these scientists became, Meloni often fails to provide sufficient background to establish an appropriate context from which to view their nonscientific activities. He also falls into the trap of rendering judgments on the people and events of the past without referencing the moral standards of their time and often gets the facts, and the history, of the science horribly wrong. This is most obvious from his oft-repeated, but weakly supported, claim that results of experiments and interpretations of some contemporary, self-styled epigeneticists embody the resurrection of Lamarckian soft inheritance and his conviction that those interpretations represent a credible alternative to the gene-based, hard-inheritance consensus of contemporary evolutionary theory.<sup>1</sup> To be fair, an explanation of the scientific aspects of this history isn't really what interests Meloni. Rather, his volume is a manifesto for a new field of social/philosophical inquiry: political biology (which he defines as a unification of the sociology of scientific knowledge), science and technology studies, biopolitics, and a project for historical ontology and epistemology. In a review solicited by the publisher, Staffan Müller-Wille observed that "for Meloni, biology is always a form of doing politics," an interpretation with which I agree.<sup>2</sup> However, if politics infuses all aspects of biology (or any science), analysis of its political aspects becomes synonymous with efforts to come to grips with the science itself, which this volume does not do. Perhaps a more useful parsing would be to separate the facts that scientists discover from the uses to which those facts can be, and have been, put.



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<sup>1</sup> Those interested in the latter topic should consult Ute Deichmann's recent articles, which offer a more penetrating, well-documented, and authoritative perspective; see Ute Deichmann, "Epigenetics: The Origins and Evolution of a Fashionable Topic," *Developmental Biology* 416, no. 1 (2016): 249–54 and "Why Epigenetics Is Not a Vindication of Lamarckism and Why that Matters," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 57 (2016): 80–82.

<sup>2</sup> Staffan Müller-Wille, review of Political Biology by Meloni, [www.palgrave.com/la/book/9781137377715#reviews](http://www.palgrave.com/la/book/9781137377715#reviews).

