

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *The Economization of Life* by Michelle Murphy. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017

Kira Frank
Alabama University

The Economization of Life is a dense and enlightening work. Broken into three arcs—an introduction, 12 short chapters, and a coda—the book discusses the ways in which life has been economized. Murphy answers this question: How have we learned to value and measure life through the lens of economics? Taking the reader through an examination of studies and theories of experts, including Raymond Pearl, Mahmood Mamdani, Enke, Frank Notestein, John Keynes, and Farida Akhter, the author argues for a “politics against population” (p. 145).

Murphy recounts the history of reproductive rights from a perspective that has not received the attention it deserves, namely, eugenics and population control. There is much to appreciate about Murphy’s explication of histories across cultures over the past century. In perhaps the most optimistic chapter, “Experimental Otherwise,” Murphy takes a turn toward the positive possibilities out of the situations in Bangladesh and elsewhere. She discusses Farida Akhtar’s widely read short story, “Dreaming Technoscience” and the impact of Akhtar’s press, UBINIG on regenerative feminist politics in South Asia. The discussion engages the reader with special attention to the tyranny of both human and natural forces that enabled a perfect storm of experimentality in Bangladesh.

Murphy argues that experiment is largely problematic, as it seems to be a mere tool of population control for some people. But recognizing the possibilities experiment grants us when used to enable and educate, Murphy claims that experiment can be a healthy feminist tool of self-care and possibility—to discover, to enable, and to improve life. Ability to do experiments is power, and power can be used in helpful or harmful ways, especially when in the hands of those whose first thought is money rather than improving life. As Murphy admits, the book is short. Perhaps it is too short; perhaps the book needs more space for concrete examples of positive experiments.

Toward the end of the book, Murphy states, “[P]opulation has become for me an intolerable concept... I want better concepts for naming aggregate life” (p. 137). Any reader of this book will

most likely leave with feelings similar to Murphy's. Perhaps distributed reproduction would be a more appropriate term to begin a new conversation around our growing world, family planning, and ways in which we place value on girls. Accordingly, Murphy argues for a retheorization of reproduction itself.

Murphy weaves helpful threads of history, literature, and economics, guides the reader through complicated ideas, and leaves enough notes so research can continue beyond the book's borders. It must be noted that *The Economization of Life* is not a light read. Rather, through its vocabulary and structure, the book demands readers' full attention from beginning to end. As Murphy warns, the book is short, but it is dense.

The Economization of Life is a useful and an instructive tool for policy makers and researchers on population and reproductive health, and for scholars and students in gender, women, and sexuality studies, or anyone who may be concerned with matters of reproductive rights. It is our job to understand the ways in which the notion of reproductive rights has been shaped by racist and capitalist priorities that continue to determine which lives are worth living and which lives would be better averted, or never born at all. In other words, who gets to be born, who is aborted, and who is stopped before conception through birth control.