

Best of the Bay 2005: Local Heroes

July 27, 2005

Oakland's Center for Genetics and Society made the news last year when it was one of the only liberal organizations to raise questions about California's stem cell initiative. Since then, the mainstream news media have started to recognize that many of the group's warnings were prescient. But stem cell research is just one narrow thread in the tangle of genetic technologies that the academics and activists who work at the center are monitoring.

CGS leaders Richard Hayes and Marcy Darnovsky were in an informal study group of Bay Area lefties — mostly academics — in the mid-1990s when they started to unearth the alarming (but largely unnoticed) predictions that biologists at some of the country's most elite institutions were making.

"A voice was emerging saying, 'Wow, it's it going to be great when we can genetically engineer our children into a superior human species!' This was from Nobel laureates, from distinguished scientists," recollects Hayes, who had left his job as a national organizer at the Sierra Club to do graduate work at UC Berkeley.

Darnovsky, who was teaching college courses at the time, says, "There were a couple months there when I actually had convinced myself that no, [there was] no need to take this seriously," that it was merely a few peculiar scientists. "But it was like turning over a rock and seeing, you know, there's all this stuff going on underneath it." Hayes and Darnovsky were shocked that this scientific revolution seemed to be below the radar



Photo: front row from left: Osagie Obasogie, Richard Hayes, Patricia Berne. Back row, from left: Charles Garzon, Sujatha Jesudason, Marcy Darnovsky, Brittney Fosbrook, Jesse Reynolds.

of public officials and political groups. They started working to spread the word to existing organizations, but eventually they decided that there needed to be a pro-science, pro-choice group that would focus on analyzing the rapid-fire innovations in genetics and the opportunities, good and bad, that they might present.

"We do have this attack on science coming out of the religious right," Darnovsky explains. "And we have to really acknowledge that is a very pernicious force. But what it's doing is it's driving people in this direction of being completely uncritical of science and technology precisely at the time when science and technology are becoming so commercialized and driven by corporate bottom lines."

In 2001 they formed the nonprofit CGS, which now has 10 staffers working to stimulate debate on the social justice implications

of new genetic technologies. Specifically, the CGS is looking for ways to, as Hayes puts it, "allow legitimate medical research to proceed, but draw the line against this new techno-eugenics."

The most immediate threat, Darnovsky says, is probably rampant genetic engineering and so-called designer babies.

"I think that leads us really quickly into a nightmarish situation where we're not worrying anymore about giving the kids who are here in the world enough to eat, and clean water to drink, and basic health care," she says. "Instead, we're worrying about fixing it up so that really wealthy people — who are going to be the only ones who can afford this stuff — are trying to get the edge with, you know, an extra 20 percent chance of an extra 10 IQ points."

Though you might expect Hayes and Darnovsky to sound petrified about the future, they seem hopeful that with consideration and structure, we can reap the rewards of advances in biology without opening ourselves up to some sort of dystopian future.

They say that interest in these issues is mushrooming, but that the scientists are still far ahead of public discourse. Darnovsky says that while California's new stem cell enterprise has been pushed to make itself more accountable to the public, there is still work to be done. "The silver lining to the stem cell situation in California is, I think, more people are really starting to realize that to focus on the politics of embryos is to miss a lot."

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