global north (‘it only takes a four-hours for Ebola to reach Texas from Liberia’) at the cost of reproducing debilitating falsehoods about the true source of most disease threats.

The material and rhetorical risks in this strategy became evident as COVID-19 spread across from a prosperous China into Europe and North America. PPE was stockpiled and vaccines pre-emptively bought up for their own populations by the wealthy states. The iron lock of global patent law remained in place. Moreover, since the threat was internal to the northern hemisphere, the south was initially ignored, then favoured with sporadic charitable donations all made with an eye to geopolitical advantage. In the face of the indifference of the global north and the failure of global health, attention has been directed to south-south solutions, including negotiating coalitions in international organisations, the creation of local vaccine manufacturing capacity, and the development of continental multilateralism in health, for example through the African Union. Of course, it is important not to romanticise the nation state or to overlook its historical failings, and indeed D’Arcangelis is careful not to do so. Nonetheless, as she suggests, within the current situation it offers a space of ‘ethical exception’ from which to resist the injustices of health imperialism.

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Conviction: the making and unmaking of the violent brain, by Oliver Rollins, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2021, Pp.225, $25.00 (paper), ISBN: 9781503627895

This time is different. Such is the refrain of neuroscientists eager to illuminate the biology of crime and violence using new imagining technologies. Haunted by the sordid pasts of eugenics and criminal anthropology, those championing this latest effort insist that the crudely reductionistic, ethically dubious, and racially
problematic thinking of yesterday is no more. Armed with a “biosocial” rebranding and the mystique of fMRI, neuroscientists promise a more enlightened science. Things have changed, they insist.

And they would be right. Not about the enlightened nature of this newest effort to biologize violence, but rather about the more sophisticated rationale offered in defense of it. Social scientists have long swatted away biological explanations of violence as reductionistic. Extensive research on the social determinants of crime and violence – not to mention the cultural assumptions wrapped up in our very construction of these issues – underscore the need for research attuned to the “social.” A myopic focus on biology is just plain bad science. But as neuroscience has evolved, so too must our social scientific critiques. The crows of biological reductionism no longer suffice.

In Conviction: The Making and Unmaking of the Violent Brain, Oliver Rollins provides a much needed, updated interrogation of the neuroscience of crime. Conviction takes its title from the deep-seated ontological and epistemological commitments neuroscientists hold: specifically (1) that the mind is brain and (2) that new imagining technologies, like fMRI, offer a promising path to identifying the long-elusive biological correlates of crime and violence. This conviction has solidified into what Rollins deems the “violent brain model” – an assumption that the brain is locus of violence and criminality. But this is not the brazen biological criminology of one’s grandfathers. Painfully aware of its problematic history, the new advocates of this science couch their research program in terms of risks, neuroplasticity, and a commitment a “biosocial episteme.” Rollins holds this glossy rebranding up to scrutiny and finds the science wanting, susceptible to same blind spots regarding the social that have long plagued the biologization of violence.

To be clear, Conviction is not some screed. Rollins takes the science seriously, meticulously dissecting it to reveal the problematic assumptions at its core. He provides a measured analysis of the conceptual limits of the violent brain model and the methodological limits of new imaging technologies. To build his analysis, Rollins draws on interviews and a content analysis of more than 300-peer reviewed articles. While the method is straightforward, it is what Rollins does with this data that sets his analysis apart. He has a keen eye that brings to the fore insights lesser observers might miss. The upshot is a masterclass in the critical appraisal of complex scientific ideas.

Conviction is structured around two parts. Part I unpacks the research program, specifically the research assumptions and conventions by which neuroscientists squeeze the complexity of crime and violence into the violent brain model. Part II focuses neuroscientists’ shallow nods to social factors and dynamics. Rollins reveals neuroscientists’ promises to be more branding than substance, a defensive crouch aimed at heading off controversy rather than tackling the immensely complicated interactions between the biological and the social. While Rollins
acknowledges some of the potential of this research program, he throws cold water on the field’s more expansive promises. What emerges is a study of a flawed and limited scientific program – as all scientific programs are – made all the more concerning given the hype surrounding it and the worrying consequences should the violent brain come to drive social policy.

Within this general analysis, Conviction offers a wealth of additional insights. Particularly noteworthy in this regard is the chapter titled, “The Taboo of Race.” Here Rollins creatively engages in a study of absence, specifically the allergies that neuroscientists have developed toward talking about race. Hypersensitive to accusations of racism, neuroscientists deploy a variety of mental somersaults to avoid race. Such “color blind” science might indicate a modicum of progress over its overtly racists forebearers, but it ends up producing ignorance. By refusing to reflect on race, neuroscientists elide the extent to which their very objects of analyses – crime and violence – are shot through with racial power dynamics and historical legacies of racism. Scared to say anything about race, neuroscientists are unable to make good on their promise of integrating the social and the biological.

Conviction spurs social scientists to move beyond knee-jerk criticisms of biological reductionism and attend to the how of this reductionism in light of new developments in neuroscience. My one criticism of the book amounts to a quibble: I would have liked more analysis of the public-facing side of this research program. Some of these researchers have become influential public figures and, in these roles, have proffered inflated claims in the name of hype. This is the backdrop to Rollins’ main argument but perhaps more focus on how researchers mislead the public is warranted. Nevertheless, Conviction is a vital book that pushes social scientific critiques of neuroscience onto more sophisticated terrain. The biologization of crime and violence is a seductive and dangerous idea that scientists cannot seem to resist, even with all its ethical baggage. Concerned social scientists must meet it with arguments that are not recycled from the last battle but engage with the contemporary manifestations of this bad idea.

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