

REVIEW

The Economization of Life by Michelle Murphy (Duke University Press, 2017)

Kallista Bley

University of Wisconsin–Madison
kbley@wisc.edu

In *The Economization of Life*, Michelle Murphy places reproduction and the (de)valuation of lives (and lives not yet lived) at the center of how we understand social science quantification, experimentation, and intervention, along with their corresponding necropolitical governance in the twentieth century. Using archival methods, Murphy shows how relations between economy and population have been historically and materially assembled and, in doing so, demonstrates the situatedness and contingencies of these assemblages, opening possibilities for other futures. The book, described by Murphy as a “provocation” (p. 7), offers a compelling example of how to assess and analyze the material effects and affects of our capitalist environment (referred to as a “surround” (p. 1)), without precluding agency or the potential for “life otherwise” (p. 81).

The Economization of Life is a thought-provoking contribution to feminist science and technology studies (STS) scholarship that builds — as noted by Murphy — upon the recent efforts of those studying the

Bley, K. (2018). Review of: *The Economization of Life by Michelle Murphy (Duke University Press, 2017)*. *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*, 4 (2), 1-6.
<http://www.catalystjournal.org> | ISSN: 2380-3312

© Kallista Bley, 2018 | Licensed to the Catalyst Project under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives license

confluences of life and capital accumulation, particularly through the lens of reproduction (p. 13). Furthering this work, Murphy theorizes the economization of life as distinct from a commodification of life by considering how population is governed towards improving economic growth, while also maintaining conditions of precarity. Murphy emphasizes the “macro” aspect of the economization of life that manages “aggregate life” for nation-state economies and global capitalism (p. 13; p. 125). Rather than surplus value created through capitalist production, value is created in this system by managing overpopulation and controlling population “surplus” (p. 6). With examples from transnational non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in Bangladesh, Murphy demonstrates how lives are counted and differentially valued as a form of racialized violence resulting from research interventions. In this context, Murphy explores the social relations that are constitutive of quantification and often remain unexamined. Even after eugenics was commonly disregarded, Murphy shows how racialized devaluation of life persisted through the quantification of differential life worth, a valuation assessed in relation to economic productivity.

Alongside an introduction and a coda, Murphy organizes the chapters into three sections (Arcs I to III) that trace the assemblage formations related to the economization of life from the early and mid-twentieth century (Arc I), the 1960s to the 1980s (Arc II), and through the 1990s (Arc III) (p. 9). Murphy opens the book with iconic bottle images from *Drosophila* experiments that contain populations of encased fruit flies. Using Raymond Pearl’s research that population curves — whether of fruit flies or humans — can be managed, Murphy poses the question of how “economy” became the “container for reproduction” (p. 14) and how we can think outside this surround (p. 1). Examples from this text — informed by twentieth-century scientific research — span the *Drosophila* experiments of Pearl (Introduction), calculations of gross domestic products (GDPs) (Arc I), transnational family planning efforts (Arc II), and gendered human capital investment campaigns (Arc III). Across the arcs, practices of quantifying, monitoring, and differentially valuing life

“accumulate” as Murphy documents their formation and layering over time (p. 103). Murphy closes the book with a coda retheorizing reproduction as a “distributed process” with “uneven ... potentials” (p. 142).

The book is short and yet dense with layers of meaning that can be revisited. Murphy introduces many terms throughout the book such as “epistemic infrastructures,” “phantasmagram,” “thick data,” and “experimentality,” and in some cases the notes add extra description that is particularly helpful in navigating this lexicon. For example, Murphy distinguishes the definition of “economization” from variations used by other authors and details the connection to a “regime of value.” According to Murphy’s notes, this narrative evokes both the economic and cultural meanings of terms such as “value” (p. 149). These multiple meanings can be read across the text in language such as worth, accumulation, investment, production, consumption, futures, and reproduction.

In Arc I “Phantasmagrams of Population and Economy,” Murphy demonstrates how we come to understand “economy” through its quantification and affects, while highlighting the racist logics that underlie prominent economic and demographic arguments that link economic growth with reduced fertility and “averted births” (or lives not to be lived) (p. 47). Following Pearl’s experiments, the Keynesian quantification, measurement, and modeling of the macroeconomy in the 1930s made economic interactions legible and amenable to governmental management and manipulation for the maximization of prosperity. Murphy brings attention to the racialized lives not valued or not lived and the often unseen processes of data compilation that “haunt” calculations of GDP and demographic transitions (p. 26).

In the case of GDP, these calculations reveal the ambiguities of a number that is usually taken for granted to be a mirror of economic activity. Murphy draws attention to how estimations are calculated, including for example, the summation of results from sample surveys of individual hairdressers to generate population aggregates for the

“production of all hairdressers” (p. 23). Particularly poignant is Murphy’s analysis of how the economic is constituted by “delineating the extraeconomic,” where, in the case of the state war machine, “all the bullets, warheads, tanks, tear gas, and drones of war” are calculated as additions to the GDP, whereas the “loss of life and world” that occurs — whether through disaster, war, or policing — “produces no subtraction” (p. 27).

In the second arc, “Reproducing Infrastructures,” Murphy explores how the value of life is calculated, with differential valuations of those deserving (or not) to live, reproduce, and be human. Murphy refers to “epistemic infrastructures” to indicate the materiality of social science research efforts (p. 6), and describes in this arc how these infrastructures have proliferated in Bangladesh, while those related to basic utilities such as electricity and water languished. Murphy considers how efforts to control reproduction have sought to manage “surplus life,” while in effect devaluing existing precarious lives and leaving the structures that create precarity intact (pp. 93-94). Murphy explores how transnational NGO family planning trials in postcolonial settings created a form of governance or “experimentality” (using Vinh-Kim Nguyen’s term) that encouraged repeated intervention and merged the provision and consumption of family planning services with participation in research studies (p. 79). In these contexts, accessing vital services, such as reproductive health care and immunizations, became contingent on research participation. Alongside her critiques, Murphy also presents examples of feminist experimentation and life-affirming research possibilities that serve as counterpoints and demonstrate potentials, as evidenced in the projects of Farida Akhter.

The third arc, “Investable Life,” details how the valuation of life is monetized through gendered human capital investment campaigns. Murphy shows how educational investment in girls is leveraged to “increase the value of life” through a process of “anticipatory calculations” where investment is envisioned to lead to future workers while reducing fertility rates and increasing GDPs (pp. 113-114). Rather

than limitations being placed on capitalist accumulation for the benefit of populations, evidence across the three arcs shows how populations have been controlled to improve economic growth. As Murphy indicates, the analysis of this book could be furthered through ethnography and incorporation of voices capturing a breadth of lived experiences and ways of knowing and understanding (p. 7).

How do we move away from population as a racialized calculation of differential life worth toward other forms of valuing and inhabiting collective life? Murphy suggests a "distributed reproduction" that shifts the focus of reproduction from individual bodies and child birth (reflective of a modern definition of reproduction) and reorients toward reproduction as a "becoming-in-time of life with the many" (noted as more common to the 1700s and 1800s) (pp. 141-142). In this retheorization, Murphy draws attention to understanding the "distribution of life chances, pasts, and futures," the reproduction of infrastructures, and the "politics of redistribution" (p. 141).

Murphy's book not only provides a powerful critique of the racialized violences of quantification but also creates new openings for a dreaming and imagining that extends beyond our capitalist surround. Murphy considers the political potential of dreaming while awake as introduced by the feminist author of science fiction from the early 1900s, Begum Roquiah Shekhawat Hossein, and in doing so asks: "How does one awaken to the phantasma of economy and population?" (pp. 55-56). Envisioning other formations of economy and population, Murphy closes the book questioning: "What becomes possible if one breaks the bottle of economy and refuses the curve of population?" (p. 145). The argument in this book demonstrates that by showing the historical and material formation of economy and population, we can see these as assembled, as historically and temporarily formed, and as possibilities, among many, rather than inevitabilities. This creates potential for other formations, not only of other futures but also more liveable presents, of collective lives rather than aggregations, of life unbounded by economy. Murphy tempers this with a vision for a politics that is "more than pessimistic and

less than optimistic” and that does not “reproduce” the unevenness it critiques (p. 145).

Bio

Kallista Bley is a graduate student in the Department of Geography at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.