

BOOK REVIEW

James A. Stark, *The Cult of Youth: Anti-ageing in Modern Britain*

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Anti-ageing can mean a range of things. It can refer to practices aimed at rejuvenation to restore the health, vitality and performance capacity of people; the term can designate the retardation of the ageing process through improvement of the physiological and constitutional health of men and women; or it can simply be about a range of cosmetic practices to ‘fake’ youthfulness. Being healthy and beautiful and looking healthy and beautiful are not the same thing and modern societies have brought forth a range of strategies to achieve one or the other. These included the ancient advice of dietetic living aimed at regulating food, drink, exercise, rest and sleep to improve people’s underlying constitutional health and complexion as well as cosmetics to enhance youthful attractiveness. As James F. Stark demonstrates in this illuminating book, such advice came from many quarters: members of the medical profession; lay health reformers; advocates of sports, exercise and physical culture; and the advertisements of manufacturers of health products. All of them were keen to promote (or warn about) specific ways to retard ageing or to rejuvenate bodies and minds. This was in many ways a transnational phenomenon: many names and practices that were well known in Britain would have been familiar to people in the United States, Australia or many European countries.

Stark begins by discussing the impact of endocrinological models on the promotion of rejuvenation and popular culture. We encounter here familiar names like Serge Voronoff, with his promotion of glandular grafts of monkey testicles in aging men in the 1920s, and Eugen Steinach’s ‘vaso-ligature’ (a type of vasectomy), which aimed to restore masculine prowess, vitality and youthful vigour in ageing men. As the author points out, the influence of endocrinological ideas in popular health discourse never fully disappeared even though the hype about Voronoff and Steinach receded during the 1920s. But their notoriety left a legacy in popular fascination with hormonal applications through skincare products which was continuously fed by the pharmaceutical and cosmetic industries in subsequent decades.

The author emphasizes temporal continuities between medical technologies and treatments. He points out, for example, the legacy of nineteenth-century electrotherapies, which found adaptive applications in rejuvenation therapies in the 1920s and were supplemented by newer technologies, such as UV lamp therapies and violet rays. Given the author’s emphasis on long-term continuities it seems a bit odd that his chapter titles emphasize precise and short time spans, for example ‘Diet, 1918–1929’ or ‘Exercise, 1930–1939’. Surely, dietary and fitness advice always played a significant role in popular health

and ageing discourse. If there was a specific aspect that justified these temporal designations the author does not spell it out adequately.

Interesting is Stark's idea that widespread public preoccupation with ageing, rejuvenation and the desire of presenting a youthful self led to a complete commodification of the life course, which he demonstrates masterfully in his chapter on skin care and cosmetics. He points here to two divergent strategies by cosmetic entrepreneurs. Whereas Elizabeth Arden tended to emphasize her products' synergies with nature, Helena Rubinstein used a scientized language that described her hormone creams in terms of endocrinological effects, re-creating 'Vital Glandular Elements of "First Youth"' (p. 180).

There is some imprecision in Stark's analysis when he questions historical narratives that cast the promotion of exercise, physical fitness and manliness in 'sociopolitical rather than demographic or biological terms' (p. 167). I am not convinced by this distinction. Would it not be better to talk here about qualitative biopolitics aimed at fostering and preserving the fitness, performance and work capacity of people into old age? Such concerns were not limited to Britain. In Germany, for example, qualitative population policies promoted exercise and mass sports to restore the physical health and will to work of all age groups. These initiatives complemented eugenics propaganda and practices aimed at improving the hereditary health of the nation. Both improving physical fitness and eugenics ultimately aimed at promoting the health and productivity of the population as a whole but they are best analysed as two distinct biopolitical strategies. It is, therefore, not very helpful to lump them together and interpret regeneration and revitalization simply as 'an expression of eugenic ideals' (p. 140), even though there might have been, at times, Lamarckian undercurrents in British eugenic thought which make this plausible. In any case, whatever the relationship between eugenic ideas, rejuvenation and the promotion of physical fitness in interwar Britain, I think it still has to be worked out.

Despite some shortcomings, *The Cult of Youth* is still a notable achievement because of the breadth of the materials brought together by Stark and the many overlaps and continuities which he traces between medical technologies, fitness promotion, rejuvenation and anti-ageing strategies and consumer products that promised a youthful and healthy appearance.