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Elizabeth Ewen & Stuart Ewen, **Typecasting: On the Arts & Sciences of Human Inequality**, New York: Seven Stories Press, 2006, 555 pp., $34.95 (hardcover).

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In my undergraduate course on the politics of media there comes a time, each semester, when we turn our attention toward stereotypes. It's not a good time. Despite my best intentions and strident interventions, even my most sophisticated students slip into simplistic analysis. It goes something like this: Stereotypes are bad, their use by "the media" oppress people, and if "they" would stop using stereotypes then people wouldn't be so oppressed. A veritable stereotype of stereotyping. Next semester will be different: I'll be armed with Elizabeth and Stuart Ewen's *Typecasting.*

Typecasting, as far as I know, is the most comprehensive historical work on the subject, with its hefty 555 pages focusing primarily on European and American development of stereotyping from the Enlightenment to today. But it's heft is not what makes it so useful – instead it is the context in which the Ewens cast stereotyping. To define their topic they begin with Walter Lippmann's classic explanation. Stereotyping is a response to living in a multicultural and mass society. In a world where we are bombarded with new and foreign stimulus every day, we group and categorize, creating stable, simplified models -- "pictures in our heads" -- with which to sort our new experiences, including our experiences with new people. Lippmann was not ignorant of the politics of stereotyping, indeed his 1922 book *Public Opinion* was largely concerned with this issue, but his understanding was constrained by his belief that stereotyping is a more-or-less natural, and certainly inevitable, process that is merely exploited by those with political interests: the manufacturers of consent. In other words, for Lippmann politics is something that happens to stereotypes.

The Ewens reverse this equation, arguing that stereotypes are the products of a political process by historicizing the impetus to categorize human "types." I don't think it is an accident that the authors called their book *Typecasting,* not Stereotyping, for they see the practice of stereotyping as the surface manifestation of a much larger phenomenon: classifying and controlling the social forces unleashed by the rise of democratic sentiment (and spread of globalization) from the 18th century onward. As the Ewens argue:

> The Declaration of Independence was a time bomb. In the decades and centuries following 1776, these democratic faiths would be employed, again and again, in the name of those who remained socially, politically, and economically disenfranchised…. In the late 18th century, however, democratic principles were part and parcel of a world in which the new systems of inequality, functioning on a global level, were becoming increasingly virulent. To a large extent, the rise of modern stereotyping, the detailed elaboration of ostensibly scientific taxonomies of human difference, was a direct response to the inherent contradictions of a democratic age (p. 22).

Nowhere are these "inherent contradictions" more clearly revealed than in the writings of the author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson. The same mind that conceived that "all Men are created equal" would also write that blacks are "inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind" and use the analogy of proper husbandry of domestic animals to argue for racial purity (p. 21). Jefferson is not held up as a hypocrite -- a slave owner who penned one of the most famous documents of human liberty, an advocate of pure race that had five mixed-race children with a slave named Sally Hennings, herself the half-sister of Jefferson's late wife – instead he is an exemplar of tensions within our democracy. How do you reconcile the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity with the patent realities of inequality and division? You convince yourself, and others, that people are naturally separate and unequal and thus there is a natural limit to political and social equality.

Over the next five hundred plus pages the Ewens chronicle the ways in which disparity has been reasoned and displayed, that is: "the arts and sciences of human inequality." The authors include sections on the idealized aesthetic of Western art; the odd curiosity cabinets of European collectors; freak shows and world's fairs, the profiling of criminals; the rise and fall of popular eugenics; a wonderfully quirky aside on Roget's Thesaurus; and finally, the use and abuse of stereotypes in popular culture from minstrel shows to the silver screen, from war propaganda to contemporary advertising. Although these parts work in sequence, they can also be read on their own, making both reading and assigning this weighty tome a bit easier.

My favorite section is the extensive one (really a mini-book in itself) on physiognomy and phrenology. These related "sciences," the former which purported to read a person's character from their facial appearance, the latter which systemized the approach into a study of the bumps and lumps and shapes of the human skull, were accepted ways of making sense of the proclivities and possibilities of people throughout the 19th century. What I found so fascinating was the widespread legitimacy of what we would now consider pseudo-science. Scholarly studies were published in the *American Phrenological Journal,* and important figures like Ulysses S. Grant lined up to have their heads read. Walt Whitman asked his fellow countrymen to learn the "phrenology… of the land" in his epic *Leaves of Grass* (published, curiously, by Fowler and Wells, the leading practitioners and promoters of phrenology in the U.S.). After a particularly heinous railway accident, newspaper editor and moralist Horace Greeley suggested subjecting engineers to phrenological examinations. And Horace Mann, the great educator, praised phrenology for its ability to "save the race from destruction" (p. 131).

As implied in Mann's remarks, the study of lumps and bumps and shapes of the skull was not exactly value neutral. Predictably, criminals, drunkards, the mentally ill, and other undesirables had tellingly imperfect skulls. As did people that originated anyplace other than Northern Europe. The head of "the typical negro," wrote the leading phrenologist Samuel Wells, demonstrates that "he is slow and indolent. But persistent and capable of great endurance … a child in mental development" (p. 143). The study of the skulls of American Indians led Wells's partner, O.S. Fowler, to conclude that all tribes shared a "disposition common to the race" that was "cruel, blood-thirsty and revengeful" (p. 143). These "scientific" readings of the races were quite convenient for a nation struggling with the issue of slavery in the South and fighting Indian wars out West.

Today physiognomy and phrenology are a joke, a sort of cultural embarrassment. Like minstrel shows they are things that we, a reasoning people who believe firmly in equality, would like to forget. But the inherent contradiction within our democracy remains. We believe in equality, yet nowhere is it readily found. In the past, the Ewens argue, we temporarily resolved this tension by assigning scientific and aesthetic difference, then value to that difference, to different races, classes and genders. We naturalized categories that were shaped by political interests, and then we displayed these stereotypes, thereby perpetuating them.

Stereotypes are, of course, still with us. The media portrayals of African-Americans like the eye-rolling, slow talking Steppin Fetchit may be *verboten* in our more enlightened, politically correct times, but other stereotypes have taken its place. Now there is the fanatical Muslim, the science-challenged woman, or, in a paradoxical twist, the red-state-living, stereotype-believing, bigoted white man. The recent success of Sacha Baron Cohen's film *Borat* might seem to suggest that we're moving past stereotypes: by recognizing them, then laughing at them, we mitigate their power. What the Ewens' book does, and does well, is warn us that the stereotypes we see – whether presented as possible fact by a Harvard president or parodied by a comedian on a movie screen -- are only the surface image of a much larger political and intellectual project which arises out of an enduring contradiction at the core of our society. As such, it's not likely that stereotypes are going to disappear any time soon.