and narratives. For those interested in how science is constructed through public work, Sommer's book is an outstanding resource.

The three biographical parts of the book are each detailed enough to stand on their own, but together they also paint a bigger picture: of a century in which constructing evolutionary history is also always about the politics of the present. We see vividly in Osborn's natural history displays the history of the nation and industrial capitalism; in Huxley's evolutionary work his paternalist commitment to cultural and natural heritage; and in Cavalli Sforza's genetic collections his self-avowed anti-racist vision for genetics. Most strikingly we see, near to the ends of their careers, Osborn, Huxley and Cavalli Sforza falling out of step with prevailing political, social and cultural developments: Osborn, in his racist depictions of progressive civilisation; Huxley in his anthropocentric and elitist worldview, and Cavalli Sforza in his belief in the power of genetics as a politically neutral science – a vision that has been vigorously challenged (for example) by the Indigenous Peoples Council on Biocolonialism. Sommer's book impressively shows how evolutionary history in the 20th and 21st centuries has been part of influential efforts to use biology remake human society. But questions about *whose* society and *whose* history become ever more pressing in the present day, particularly as genetics expands its authority on human identity and its past. For understanding the history of these questions, Sommer's century-long view of evolutionary biology is an fascinating and important resource.

For people wanting to understand these questions, and those interested in how science is constructed in the public.

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Zanetti, François: **L'Électricité médicale dans la France des Lumières**. Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 2017. 304 p. Ill. (Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment, 7). £ 70.–. ISBN 978-0-7294-1197-4

François Zanetti's *L'Électricité médicale dans la France des Lumières* is an erudite and fascinating example of the kind of socio-cultural history of medicine which in recent decades has largely replaced the old presentist, triumphalist narratives of medical progress. Formerly shunned for playing little or no part in the supposed "onward march of medical science", it is precisely medical electricity's spectacular failure to attain scientific status that makes it a story about the society in which for several decades – between the 1750s and 1780s – it flourished, that is well worth telling. Although invariably presented at the time as a medical breakthrough of tremendous scientific potential whose therapeutic pay-off was imminent, in fact it never effectively delivered on the hopes it raised. It has thus been easy to write it off as a sad symptom of an age of pre-scientific medicine before the birth of the clinic. It is François Zanetti's achievement in this deeply-researched, subtle and highly intelligent monograph to show how the *histoire croisée* of medicine and electricity in the Enlightenment illuminates numerous facets of French society, culture and science.

Scientific interest in electricity surged in Europe from the 1730s, thought it remained mainly within the domain of experimental physics. From the late 1740s the public demonstrations of the famous abbé Nollet achieved considerable renown, but

it was only from the 1750s that physicians began to take an interest in the phenomenon. The most significant work in this phase of this, the first act in the three-act drama of medical electricity, was done by the Montpellier-based nosologist François Boissier de Sauvages. His experiments largely with paralytics proved inconclusive, however, and after a few publications, he lost interest in the subject. A more fruitful period opened up in the 1770s, with large numbers of savants renewing the field. In particular, the state-supported *Société Royale de Médecine* established in 1774 was seduced by the therapeutic potential of the practice, and it sponsored important work by Pierre Mauduyt de la Varenne. Regrettably again, however, positive results were few and far between, and the advent of Revolution in 1789 triggered the third and final act in the medical history drama, which saw the sweeping away of the institutions of Ancien Régime science and the emergence of new scientific paradigms in which medical electricity secured no niche.

What is especially illuminating in the narrative that Zanetti recounts is to observe how the small world of practitioners and promoters of medical electricity over these decades were enfolded within and drew their sustenance from three larger, more all-encompassing domains. First, medical electricity sought to establish itself within a scientific establishment eager for change and committed to Enlightenment narratives of progress. Yet, second, the practice also soon embedded itself in the wider medical marketplace, and indeed the porosity between the worlds of science and commerce, made it perennially prone to penetration by sheer charlatanism – a tendency heightened by the fact that many of the champions and proponents of medical electricity lacked scientific credentials of any kind. (Zanetti devotes an entertaining chapter to the *charlatan électrique*, the abbé Sans.) Thirdly, medical electricity also became a subject of philanthropic concern and *bienfaisance*, as its promoters sought to adapt its methods to care for the bodies of the poor and needy.

The fact that the champions of medical electricity were from three such diverse sources – scientifically-minded physicians, freewheeling medical charlatans and pious and do-gooding ecclesiastics – gave it the appearances of dynamism and vitality. But this became a source of weakness. The fact, for example, that some spectacular cures effected through medical electricity could be seen by some as miraculous tarnished the practice's scientific credentials. The public farrago surrounding Mesmerism in the 1780s also came to cast a shadow over the therapeutic claims of invisible fluids.

Fully alert to the complexities and tensions of the field he analyses, Zanetti proves an expert guide through the twists and turns that proliferate in the story of medical electricity. His focus is very much on France, though he also sketches out some of the international dimensions of the subject. The kind of careful and tightly-focussed research that he has done for France is largely lacking elsewhere. Let us hope that *L'Électricité médicale dans la France des Lumières* will prove an inspiration to scholars from across Europe to widen the focus so as to give us a genuinely transnational history of medical electricity.

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