1. THE REVOLUTION AND ITS REPERCUSSIONS

In his book on the fears plaguing the European cultures and societies between the 14th and 18th centuries, the French historian Jean Delumeau argues that the French Revolution would not have paved the way into the future or permanently removed the old fears from the collective mentality if it had not been progressively overcome by an economic and technological revolution (si elle n’avait pas été progressivement doublée par une révolution économique et technique). A crucial aspect emerges from this quotation: The idea and belief that political transformations precede technological and scientific transformations, or that political changes create the conditions for their development and implementation. Historians have the inclination to read past epochs moving from codes and discourses embedded in political contexts and strategies. They tend, in other words, to read the past moving from one point, identified by them as a (revolutionary/epistemological) caesura, towards the present time, from which they write their facts. Such an approach is rooted in an understanding of scientific and technological changes as derivatives from political pragmatism. To this methodology the idea of progress is fundamental. It goes back to the 18th century. There the idea of a new society emerged which was considered capable of turning its own fate into a progressive improvement through rationality (enlightenment), revolution (Marxism), or “social evolutionism” (liberalism). The validity of this grid has been recently questioned by an analytical approach that avoids describing history as a continuity of interconnected events initiated by political actions unavoidably leading to our present condition, and regulated by intelligible metaphysical rules. Fundamental to this analytic is the idea that people are embedded in a cultural rather than political system made of different fields of knowledge, also called codes.

The fundamental codes of a culture—those governing its language, its schemas of perception, its exchange, its techniques, its values, the hierarchy of its practices—

Michela Betta (ed.), The moral, social, and commercial imperatives of genetic testing and screening. The Australian case, 1–24.
Not only are citizens expected to respond to these codes but also policymakers and scientists. Their actions—daily negotiations, political strategies, scientific practices, and technological projects—constitute the social field of a specific time. This empirical order becomes visible through scientific objects that enter the social and political space, irrevocably changing it, and with it also human nature. But these objects do not lie around waiting to be picked up by a political institution.

Since the 1970s we have been witnessing a transformation of social and cultural codes through practices that have introduced a different way of understanding our body, reproductive freedom, health and healthcare, family relations, and new forms of hazards and risks. All those social objects are embedded in an increasingly knowledge-oriented culture. Such a transformation has been made possible by a scientific and technological shift that transposed the conception of human life from the body to the laboratory. Some observers speak of the new genetics to describe a convergence of knowledge fields such as biology, computer science, chemistry, physics, and engineering. This collaboration has undoubtedly strengthened science and technology, leading to their intellectual supremacy in social and commercial fields.

The chapters in this book set out to study some of the effects caused by genetic testing and screening of adults for genetic risks, of criminals or suspected criminals, of children searching for their “natural” parents, of workers exposed to high-risk environments, and of ethnic communities in which some members carry specific disease-causing genes. An analysis such as this, however, cannot start without first initiating a broader reflection on the practice of genetic testing in the very early stages of human life, and the values we attach to it. This analysis will help us to identify the criteria that form our decisions and practices as well as social policies. By testing and screening during the early stages of human life, we mean conducting research on embryos or stem cells and pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD). These two practices represent the initial stage of more extended testing and screening programmes.

This chapter will therefore deal with the controversy surrounding the effects of the “new genetics” on people, social relationships, and political institutions. It will investigate two discursive lines. The first questions whether recent claims for a more relaxed attitude towards liberal eugenics or freedom of choice are consistent with the cultural practices of our time, and therefore justified; the second investigates whether the criticism with which those claims have been rejected is consistent enough to justify a moral distinction between the logic of genetic enhancements and the logic of healing. Defenders of the first argument reject any form of genetic manipulation as an alien and external intervention. Their opponents argue that there is no moral difference between genetic treatment and eugenics/enhancement. But this debate is interesting for another reason. It reveals a