Books Forum: Towards a Bioeconomy

Javier Lezaun (Reviews Editor)

Department of Law, Jurisprudence & Social Thought, Amherst College, 74 College Street,
Amherst, MA 01002, USA
E-mail: jlezaun@amherst.edu

In January 2006 the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) formally launched a new ‘international futures programme’ under the title of ‘The Bioeconomy to 2030’. This two-year project brings together representatives of national research institutions from OECD member states (and a few corporations) in an effort to assess the economic potential of the biosciences and map out the regulatory and business responses that could maximize the potential of biotechnological innovation.

Several short- and medium-term goals drive this initiative. First, the OECD wants to position itself as a central institution (the ‘forum of choice’) in the international debate over the new economic values of biological life. Second, the OECD would like to extend to the ‘bioeconomy’ the kinds of metrics and taxonomies that it has so successfully employed to centralize the analysis of the international economy. Finally, by eventually establishing a series of internationally accepted definitions and assessment tools, the OECD hopes to lay the groundwork for future supranational agreements and research collaborations in this field.

The initiative is scheduled to conclude in 2008 with the issue of a final report. This is still work in progress—the initiative has so far produced only a few preliminary discussion documents and policy agendas (available at <http://www.oecd.org/>); more work will have been concluded by the time this Book Forum appears in print. In the meantime, we have asked two scholars to provide running commentaries on the nature of this initiative and its achievement, before the window of opportunity closes and what is today a ‘futures programme’ is transformed into a body of accepted wisdoms. The analyses they offer are based on the two key documents made public so far: ‘The bioeconomy to 2030: Designing a policy agenda’ (October 2006) and the initial ‘Scoping document’ (March 2006).

The notion of an emerging ‘bioeconomy’ provides an intriguing analytical perspective to scholars in the social studies of life, as several contributions to this journal have made clear. Yet, the ‘bioeconomy’ is also, as the OECD project demonstrates, a new policy jurisdiction to which national and international institutions are already laying claim. Projects like the one discussed in this Book Forum are thus expected to supply a certain objectivity, to turn this neologism into an internationally recognized category, supported by the kinds of metrics and conceptual black boxes in which institutions like the OECD specialize.