
Books Forum Introduction

Lessons and conversions: Reading across disciplinary boundaries

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BioSocieties (2014) **9**, 218.

doi:10.1057/biosoc.2014.7

Did it ever happen to you, a social scientist, that a life science publication transformed your own scholarly perspective? Or, if you are a bioscientist, has any social scientific book or article made a lasting impression on how you think about what you do for a living? We have posed these questions to three students of social science, one evolutionary anthropologist and a renegade pharmacologist. In this Books Forum, each will present a piece of writing from across the disciplinary gulf, ranging from the most recently published books to articles found in dusty nineteenth-century journals. We hope this experimental format will provide some insights into how publications can develop a life of their own beyond the more narrowly defined target audiences.

From an article by synthetic biologist Jean Peccoud, the anthropologists Anthony Stavrianakis and Gaymon Bennett adopt a critical perspective on the ontology of designed biological parts. They share Peccoud's interest in the practical consequences of this newly formed metaphysics of artifacts and read this life science publication as a corrective to social scientific interpretations of present-day biology as 'post-organismic'.

Interest in whole organisms certainly persists in public health experts and virologists concerned about the next influenza pandemic arising from the dense cohabitation of humans, pigs, ducks and domestic poultry in South China. Frédéric Keck discusses how an article by Hong Kong microbiologist Kennedy Shortridge translates lessons learned from both geography and history into the language of viruses.

Trained in an anthropology of science that habitually challenges the dichotomy of nature and culture, Alison Cool traces the origins of this opposition back to Francis Galton's 1875 article on the history of twins. In this classical work, Cool already finds the 'semantic slipperiness', which has allowed the nature/nurture debate to persist in the face of ontological critiques to this day and age.

The evolutionary anthropologist Agustín Fuentes takes reality to be 'naturecultural' and reads Donna Haraway's booklet on human–dog relations for inspiration on how to investigate the ways humans and non-human primates mutually shape the environments they share with each other. Haraway's perspective, he suggests, can help biologically oriented anthropologists to integrate into their account the human production of and entanglement in complex webs of significance.

Finally, the neuroscientist and drug researcher Felix Hasler explains how his conversion from 'neurochemical self' to neuroskeptic and critic of the pharmaceutical industry was catalyzed by reading David Healy's history of psychopharmacology and Robert Whitaker's account of the proliferation of psychiatric diagnoses. Against academic presumptions, he defends the popular nature of these books as a prerequisite for facilitating cross-disciplinary exchange.

On the basis of this small sample it would seem that recourse to other fields of inquiry enables researchers to understand and even break out of current limitations of their own knowledge cultures – usually incrementally, but sometimes on a Damascene scale.

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