

<http://somatosphere.net/2009/06/paul-rabinow-on-synthetic-anthropos.html>
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Paul Rabinow on "Synthetic Anthropos"

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By Eugene Raikhel

At the National Humanities Center's excellent [On the Human Forum](#), Paul Rabinow has a [new post](#) describing his recent work on synthetic biology—conducted in collaboration with a number of students and colleagues in other disciplines. The project emerged from Rabinow's work directing the [Human Practices Thrust](#) of the Berkeley-based [Synthetic Biology Engineering Research Center](#) (SynBERC). Rabinow begins his post with reference to the “growing number of simplistic ways” that terms such as “biopower” and “biopolitics” are used:

“Foucault's genealogical elaboration of these terms had been conceptual, historical and non-totalizing. Above all, Foucault deployed concepts like “biopower” or “governmentality” in a mode that was expressively capable of recursive rectification. These concepts were to be used and refashioned as necessary. They were part of a *History of the Present* that was a preliminary effort to open up possibilities of more precise and pertinent thinking and inquiry. Foucault's concepts were neither naming a unique deep meaning of Western or world history nor uncovering the nefarious workings of “governmentality” understood as social control. Foucault's concepts were tools to think with — not verities that encouraged people to stop thinking, inquiring, examining their own thought and action,” ([Rabinow 2009](#)).

In the rest of the post Rabinow describes the efforts of his group at thinking through whether or not synthetic biology and other related developments represent a “significant new form” or assemblage—and if so, how to characterize that form. As I understand it, the first task is to determine whether or not these phenomena require new conceptual tools for inquiry, and the second, to actually develop these tools (a project which Rabinow has taken up in much of his [recent work](#)).

Describing the actual heuristics his group has been using, Rabinow writes:

“...[W]e decided that the next critical step was to construct a diagnostic....The diagnostic is composed of three figures and their

equipmental correlates. The three figures in our diagnostic include two well recognized, if often misinterpreted figures, *Biopower* and *Human Dignity*, and an emerging constellation of elements that are being brought into relation to one another and may well be coalescing into a third figure. Provisionally, we name this emergent configuration **Synthetic Anthropos**. The term *Synthetic Anthropos* is a placeholder. It draws attention to the ways in which real-world problems are being taken up through redesign and reconfiguration so as to produce significant new forms. Examples of this work include synthetic biology, bio-complexity, and bio-security, to name three sites where re-assembly of elements is underway, ([Rabinow 2009](#)).”

As is often the case with Rabinow’s writing, I find this both extremely intriguing and thought-provoking, and frustratingly distant from the ethnographic or empirical work that he—or his students and collaborators—carry out. To be fair, this is a short blog post and I’ll be interested to read responses on the forum.

The other interesting element of this project is the way in which Rabinow and colleagues are engaging with their scientific interlocutors—their project seems to be institutionally built into the broader one of SynBERC. As this kind of institutionally-framed engagement seems to be increasingly common in anthropology (although it takes many different forms) this project seems to provide a good opportunity to think through how such a set-up may facilitate particular kinds of dialogue between social scientists and natural scientists, even as it may foreclose others.

AMA citation

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