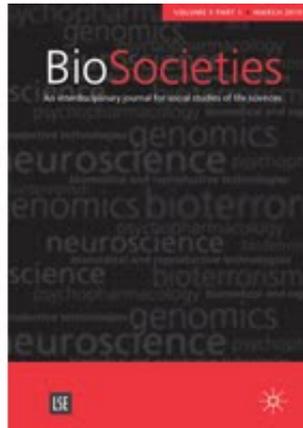


<http://somatosphere.net/2010/09/special-issue-of-biosocieties-on.html>

## Special issue of BioSocieties on biohistory

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By Eugene Raikhel



The latest issue of BioSocieties is another [special issue](#), this one guest-edited by UCLA historian [Soraya de Chadarevian](#) and devoted to biohistory. Here's how de Chadarevian describes the central issues in her [introduction](#):

“Genetic studies of human history often make headlines under such sensational titles as ‘Geneticists rewrite history’, ‘Pig DNA tells a different story of human migration’ or ‘The enigma of Italy’s ancient Etruscans is finally unraveled’.<sup>1</sup> Quite apart from the attention grabbing headlines, the articles speak to the fact that genetic studies are increasingly claiming their place in historical investigations, supplying data and interpretations on long-standing questions of group and individual identity, migration, conquest, health, kinship, technology transmission and more....

The reception of such studies by professional historians has been more than mixed as one of the contributors to this issue documents. In part, historians are simply uninterested or refuse to engage with the new genetic studies, not least because – for historical reasons – they are suspicious of any attempt of defining human populations in biological terms. Other historians who potentially are more open to engage with genetic studies are often doubtful about their scientific value. They are puzzled by the fact that scientists have come up with contradictory interpretations of the past based on genetic evidence. This does not correspond to

their understanding of (good) science. Being unfamiliar with the technical and computational tools of modern genetics, they cannot evaluate the data and do not know which laboratory to trust. Most importantly, they regard most historical frameworks used in genetic publications as outdated.

....

An important premise for a fruitful conversation between the disciplines is that genetic evidence is not understood in essentialist, deterministic or reductionist terms. Cultural and historical notions inform the questions, the sampling practices and interpretations of genetic projects at all stages and rather than providing final answers genetic studies establish probabilistic relationships between possible historical interpretations. Genetic evidence thus never stands alone and must always be considered in the context of other evidence. Such a critical understanding will help avoiding some of the pitfalls of genetic history, especially at a time when DNA-based technologies command broad cultural prestige and seem to provide answers to pivotal questions, such as those concerning guilt, innocence and identity.

Besides the intricate questions about the status of genetic evidence, other questions raised by genetic history and human population studies more generally are: How new is the field? Are there continuities with earlier biological approaches to human history? Can we learn from those experiences? What is the relation between biological and cultural history? What do the studies mean for the people that are the subjects of the research? Are there ethical standards?" ([de Chadarevian 2010](#)).

Here are the titles and abstracts for the articles:

**Soraya de Chadarevian**, [Genetic evidence and interpretation in history](#)  
**Veronika Lipphardt**, [The Jewish community of Rome: An isolated population? Sampling procedures and bio-historical narratives in genetic analysis in the 1950s](#)

In 1953, geneticist Leslie Clarence Dunn approached the Jewish community of Rome for a genetic study. The community seemed to be an appropriate object for a genetic study because it had allegedly been an 'isolated population' since antiquity. His son, a

cultural anthropologist, employed sociological methods to harden this assumption. After the team decided that their historical and sociological information was sufficient to prove the *longue durée* isolation, Leslie C. Dunn went on with serological examinations of those probands considered as belonging to the isolated community. The results were compared to data of Christian Italians and of Jewish communities in Israel. This contribution demonstrates how historical narratives of an isolated group were stabilized to serve as the basis for a biological investigation, and how they structured the genetic data achieved. Although the alignment of anthropometric data with bio-historical narratives had enjoyed much credibility long before, the alignment of serological and genetic data with such narratives was a challenge that the Dunns met with an 'interdisciplinary' approach. The article critically examines the sampling procedure as well as the narrative structure of the study results and points to general problems of bio-scientific approaches towards human biological diversity through micro level studies.

**Staffan Müller-Wille**, [Claude Lévi-Strauss on race, history and genetics](#)

In 1952, the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss published a small booklet titled *Race and History*. It formed part of a series of pamphlets on the so-called 'race-question' by leading anthropologists and geneticists, which UNESCO published as part of its campaign against racism. Roughly 20 years later, in 1971, UNESCO invited Lévi-Strauss's to give a lecture to open the International Year of Action to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination. This time the lecture, titled 'Race and culture', caused a scandal. In 2005, on occasion of the Organisation's sixtieth anniversary, Lévi-Strauss was once again invited by UNESCO to give a lecture. It followed the same lines as his 1971 speech, but now met with acclaim. In my paper I will analyse Lévi-Strauss's interventions with respect to their reliance on contemporary genetics. Lévi-Strauss always saw a close analogy between structuralist anthropology and genetics, and derived his anti-evolutionary stance from the combinatory logic that both disciplines endorsed. I will argue, that it was this combinatory logic which created room for historical contingency and agency in Lévi-Strauss's understanding of the history of humankind.

**Yulia Egorova**, [DNA evidence? The impact of genetic research on historical debates](#)

The article explores how the relationship between genetics and history is performed in genetics studies that aim to reconstruct human migrations. It focuses on two case studies: research on the nature of genetic diversity of South Asian populations and on the genetic history of different Jewish communities. Analysis is based on a close reading of 16 articles on the genetic history of Jewish and South Asian populations and on in-depth interviews with eight geneticists who played a key role in either or both types of studies and with 20 historians with expertise in the issues examined in the genetic studies under survey. The paper discusses the way geneticists construct their contribution to historical debates and the way this contribution is perceived by historians. It will be demonstrated that geneticists and historians are keen on demarcating their disciplines from each other with geneticists insisting on keeping some distance from historical evidence for the sake of maintaining 'objectivity', and historians questioning the epistemological validity of genetic interventions into their field. It will be argued that what accounts for this lack of engagement with each other's discipline is the sociocultural norms associated with academic practice in the natural sciences and humanities and a tendency towards monodisciplinary peer-review.

**Marianne Sommer, [DNA and cultures of remembrance: Anthropological genetics, biohistories and biosocialities](#)**

The article engages current human population genetic research or anthropological genetics with an emphasis on its popular forms. A general discussion of the production of biohistories on the basis of DNA analyses is elaborated by focusing on what I call the Genographic network: the Genographic Project and the associated genetic ancestry companies as well as book and film productions. In order to gain an understanding of the specificity of what is also referred to as genetic history, the development of notions such as a genetic heritage, the gene as historical document, and the DNA as archive of history are briefly treated, before approaching the recent commercializations and medializations of group-specific and personalized genetic history and identity. It is here that the challenge of joining history and DNA becomes most evident: on the one hand, the genetic knowledge is presented as particularly authentic and accurate on the basis of its epistemic objects and quantitative and technological approaches. On the other hand, in order for biohistorical identities and socialities to form, the knowledge needs to be rendered in a narrative, esthetically appealing way. This also points to differences vis-à-vis medical

genomics in that neither anthropological genetics, nor the biosocialities it facilitates, are oriented towards hope for future health solutions. In offering supposedly purely anthropological knowledge about who we are and where we come from, anthropological genetics is part of backward-looking socialities. It is part of cultures of remembrance.

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