

<http://somatosphere.net/2011/10/public-debate-and-the-conflict-of-the-faculties.html>

Public Debate and the Conflict of the Faculties

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By Anthony Stavrianakis

For the last five years [Paul Rabinow](#), [Gaymon Bennett](#) and I engaged in collaborative participant-observation in the Berkeley based Synthetic biology Engineering Research Center ([SynBERC](#)). SynBERC is a consortium of biologists and engineers from UC Berkeley, UC San Francisco, Harvard, MIT and Stanford. This Center is funded by National Science Foundation and was the first synthetic biology Engineering Research Center in the US. The NSF mandated that the Center include a research component concerned with the ethical and political context and ramifications of work in this domain of bioengineering. Rabinow was a Principal Investigator, heading this component, called Human Practices, for five years (2006-2011) with Bennett as co-director of our work in ethics.

This effort to remediate what could count as ethical and anthropological participant-observation in the biosciences had as its contrast the apparatus of bioethics exemplified by the Ethical, Legal Social Implications (ELSI) model of the Human Genome Project and the 'lab study' approach of one vein of science and technology studies (STS) research. The object of our inquiry and intervention was the problematic relation between the people developing a designed approach to making use of cells and DNAs and those who were reflecting on the relationship between what is being made and the kind of ethical reflection appropriate to such knowing and making. The objective was to re-think and produce a different practice of governance and veridiction through such collaboration between the sciences. Elements of this collaborative work which preceded our work in Human Practices and which continue today can be found at <http://anthropos-lab.net> and <http://bios-technika.net>

We left the organization in June of this year, deciding that for ethical, political and scientific reasons it was time to leave the field. Not least in our decision was the fact that our collaborative mandate from the NSF was entirely ignored by the biologists with whom we were supposed to work. For the duration of our tenure we were on the receiving end of what amounted to domination as to what were legitimate and illegitimate ethical and political problems which deserve scientist's time (not surprisingly patent law is high on the list and ecological concerns as well as preparedness for biosecurity events were low on the list).

Last week we were contacted by a journalist working with a local media network, the Bay Citizen, which is syndicated with the NYTimes. They published [an article](#) on what they framed as a personal “dispute”, but which was in fact a much more entrenched problem of the organizational forms and scientist subject-formation which impeded collaboration. We were in a situation in which enduring questions of who gets to speak the truth, in which modes, about which objects and in which venues, were ever present.

We think this recent public event should be of interest to a broad community of scholars inquiring into the relations of the bio and human sciences and those concerned with the relation of inquiry and ethics. We have recently set up [a forum](#) dedicated to discussing these issues and invite scholars to participate in discussing what we think is a significant problem facing human science inquiry into the problems of the sciences today.

See:

- Jennifer Gollan’s article “[Lab Fight Raises U.S. Security Issues](#),” *The Bay Citizen*, October 22, 2011.

Anthony Stavrianakis is a Ph.D candidate in Socio-Cultural Anthropology at UC Berkeley writing a thesis which compares two modes of participant-observation for inquiry into the political and ethical ramifications of developments in the biosciences.

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