
Books Forum Introduction

Global health in Africa

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The health of populations has been one of the central domains of biopolitics. In the nineteenth century, nation states began to be preoccupied with public health. The twentieth century saw an expansion of this concern beyond national borders. This development was driven by major international organizations such as the World Health Organization, UNICEF or the World Bank but also by non-governmental organizations like the Red Cross and Médecins Sans Frontières. In recent decades, what started out as foreign aid given by industrialized to developing countries has become a much more complex field of activity, bringing together a wide array of actors, from political representatives of nation states to United Nations technocrats and from humanitarian aid workers and local doctors to HIV patients and starving children all over the world. The new publications discussed in this Books Forum examine this transition from international to global health with a focus on Africa.

In his wide-ranging review, Andrew McDowell discusses three ethnographic monographs – Johanna Tayloe Crane’s *Scrambling for Africa*, Emilie Cloatre’s *Pills for the poorest* and Kristin Peterson’s *Speculative Markets* – as well as two edited volumes,

Giles-Vernick and Webb’s *Global Health in Africa* and João Biehl and Adriana Petryna’s *When people come first*. Together these books provide an overview of the intricacy of global health as an assemblage of national and international pharmaceutical markets and regulations, intellectual property rights treaties, collaborative knowledge production between American universities and African physicians, and the lives of geographically diverse virus strains and individual patients. McDowell organizes his review of these materials around the question of whether global health is continuous with international health or whether it is a genuinely novel phenomenon because the global cannot be reduced to relations between states.

While the books discussed by McDowell present a vision of global health centered on pharmaceuticals, Anne Pollock’s review of Peter Redfield’s *Life in Crisis* draws attention to the fact that the widespread social scientific focus on the latest biotechnologies obfuscates the importance of cheap and simple technologies, which enable *Médecins sans Frontières* to provide logistically complex emergency relief in situations of public health crises across the globe. Redfield examines this minimal biopolitics through the lens of MSF’s material culture by looking at the deployment of a six-ton global kit for the treatment of cholera epidemics, the bracelet of life color-coding the nutritional status of children and the NGO’s iconic white four-wheel-drive vehicles. In this shift of focus from cutting-edge to very basic technologies Pollock finds a moral lesson for the high tech-oriented engineering students she teaches.

As a whole, the body of literature presented in this Books Forum sheds light on the government of life itself in resource-poor settings and beyond the boundaries of the nation state.

Nicolas Langlitz is Associate Professor at The New School for Social Research in New York. He is the author of *Neuropsychedelia: The Revival of Hallucinogen Research since the Decade of the Brain* and currently studies the epistemic culture of neurophilosophy and the culture controversy in primatology.