

# The New Old Books Forum

Nicolas Langlitz (Reviews Editor)

Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Boltzmannstr. 22 D-14195 Berlin, Germany  
E-mail: nlanglitz@mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de

If the emergence of modern science was characterized by the formation and differentiation of scientific disciplines, the current ubiquity of calls for interdisciplinarity must be seen as a symptom of profound discontent with the resulting canonization of knowledge. This unease has also driven *BioSocieties* since the very first issue. When Nathan Greenslit introduced the book reviews section four years ago, he promised that it would serve as ‘a new venue for actual dialogue between scientists, social scientists, clinicians, ethicists and health policy makers’. And it did. With the transition of *BioSocieties* from Cambridge University Press to Palgrave Macmillan, the Books Forum has also changed hands—from Javier Lezaun’s to mine. I would like to use this opportunity to reintroduce the Books Forum, especially to new readers not yet familiar with its unusual format.

The primary goal of the Books Forum will continue to be to generate cross-disciplinary dialogues and debates about a wide range of books concerned with the life sciences—from sociological studies to bioethical treatises and from historical works to the latest policy documents. The Books Forum uses varying formats: one expert may write about a number of books on a particular topic; reviewers from different fields may write about the same book from their respective perspectives; authors may be given the opportunity to respond to their reviewers; key figures from different disciplines may be asked to write about what they read to inform themselves about a certain subject matter, etc.

Of course, the Books Forum will serve to inform readers about individual books and emerging bodies of literature in the social studies of the life sciences (occasionally including non-English publications to provide at least glimpses of what is going on beyond the Anglo-American book market). In the post-Gutenberg era, future reviews will additionally cover websites, blogs, and other electronic publication formats. But the book reviews are also meant to attract interest in themselves. How does a life scientist read bioethical science fiction scenarios predicting designer babies and genetic enhancement? What difference does a historical study of non-medical uses of psychopharmaceuticals make to a medical ethicist involved in the current debate about the spreading consumption of Prozac and Ritalin? How do social scientists from different European countries assess a British government report? The success of the new old Books Forum will depend on whether it can continue

Nicolas Langlitz is a postdoctoral fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Berlin. He studied medicine and philosophy and received doctoral degrees in the history of medicine (Berlin) and anthropology (Berkeley). He has published a book on Lacan’s psychoanalytic practice of variable-length sessions (*Die Zeit der Psychoanalyse. Lacan und das Problem der Sitzungsdauer*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2005) and is now writing a second one on the revival of hallucinogen research since the ‘Decade of the Brain’. From 2010 onwards, he will serve as assistant professor in the Department of Anthropology at the New School for Social Research in New York.

to publish reviews which are not just secondary literature but rather actual contributions to current controversies over the life sciences in their own right.

To achieve this goal I would like to encourage reviewers to venture into fields that are not their own, and to be audacious and sensitive enough to assess books that embody unfamiliar epistemic virtues. Such engagements are bound to produce misunderstandings, irritations and—when disciplinary expectations diverge—even some unintended humor. In a recent review of an ethnography of mania and depression in American culture, well-received in many quarters of the social sciences, a psychiatrist arrived at the following evaluation: ‘While clearly groundbreaking and instructive, it is not a rigorous scholarly work nor a book that I would recommend to my patients.’ If we really want to think about the social ramifications of the life sciences outside the disciplinary box, such statements should be taken neither as authoritative nor should they simply be dismissed. If the ‘iron cage’ of scientific disciplines proves too constricting for its inhabitants to reach out to colleagues in other disciplines, the only way out is to engage seriously with scholarly norms and expectations of researchers and professionals from other areas. And what could be a better place for entering into such conversations than a book reviews section featuring cross-disciplinary assessments of scholarly publications in and on the life sciences?

Finally, I need to remind readers that *BioSocieties* cannot accept unsolicited book reviews as the Books Forum of each issue is organized around a particular topic. But we would greatly appreciate suggestions concerning current themes and emergent literatures that readers would like to see discussed in this section.