

IS IN CENTRAL EUROPE

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**BIOETHICS IN CENTRAL EUROPE:
METHODOLOGY AND EDUCATION**

Vasil GLUCHMAN (ed.)

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BIOETHICS, SOCIAL SCIENCES AND BIOTECHNOLOGY: THE CHALLENGES OF INTERDISCIPLINARITY IN THE POLICY CONTEXT

Erikő DEMÉNY¹

The impact of biotechnology on all living things is an interdisciplinary inquiry into some of humanity's most fundamental questions: Who are we? How do we live together? How do we relate to the biosphere, to the rest of the living world?² Choosing this interdisciplinary field of knowledge production as object of inquiry offers an opportunity to investigate how traditional theories and disciplines are challenged to evolve in new directions as a response to techno-scientific developments of our times. It also allows us to study patterns of knowledge production, to examine hierarchies of knowledge and expertise, as well as the possibilities of interdisciplinary/transdisciplinary practices.

The context of knowledge production

Many analysts have noted that fundamental changes are taking place in the ways in which scientific, social and cultural knowledge is produced.³ One has not to be a science and technology expert to realise and admit that biotechnology, together with nanotechnology, information technology and cognitive science, often named as „converging technologies“, constitute a virulent field of knowledge production. In this field, the knowledge generated by various “sciences” is applied, and the resulting “technologies” have various impacts on the individuals, families, society, environment, and so on. But this is not supposed to be a unidirectional

¹ Erikő Demény, The Institute for Cultural Anthropology Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj, Romania.

² See more about this in Habermas, 2003; Brodwin, 2001; Rifkin 1998.

³ See for example: Gibbons et al., 1994; Thompson Klein, 2001; Nowotny et al. 2001.

impact. According to current "knowledge politics", "society" shall influence, through "deliberative processes" what type of knowledge and what kinds of technologies should be developed.⁴ As Schmidt notes, shaping knowledge became a central element for "building society" and an unrestricted production, diffusion and use of new knowledge is regarded as no longer feasible. Knowledge shall be regulated and restricted, fostered and funded, and side-, long-term and accumulative effects have to be taken into account, possible risks have to be identified, and observance of ethical norms monitored (Schmidt, 2007, p. 313). While 'hard' sciences provide knowledge for the development of these new technologies, other disciplines, such as bioethics, economics or social sciences are supposed to produce knowledge *about* these technologies: about their ethical and economic impact for example, or about their "societal robustness."

According to Gibbons, we are witnessing a new mode of knowledge production, which operates within a context of application, and in which problems are increasingly set in an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary framework, rather than within a disciplinary one (Gibbons, 1994, p. vii). Indeed, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity appear to be one of the most prized/acknowledged characteristics of current knowledge politics, both are highly valued and are seen as signals for post-academic knowledge. Interdisciplinarity has become a key element in science policy and it is regarded by some analysts as beneficial not only for science, but for market economy and democracy too (Klein, 2001, p. xiii.). To can asses whether a practice is interdisciplinary or not there is necessary either a definition of interdisciplinarity, or a set of criteria that should characterise interdisciplinary practice. If we take a look on the growing literature on this topic we can find many (sometimes different) criteria for interdisciplinarity.⁵ Even if

⁴ "Knowledge politics" is a new field of political activity that has emerged during the last 40 years. It normatively defines and asses the specific type of knowledge that is deemed to be the most important and most desirable for the society (Stehr, 2005).

⁵ By reviewing the literature on this topic, Schmidt identifies four types of interdisciplinarity: epistemological, methodological, ontological, and problem-oriented-interdisciplinarity (Schmidt, 2007, pp. 318-321). Thompson Klein

we take only a brief account of possible definitions and criteria of interdisciplinarity we can see that "interdisciplinarity" is a relational and socially constructed concept, whose actual content depends on agreed criteria, on how disciplines and multidisciplinary are defined, so on. As studies carried out on concrete examples of knowledge production practices demonstrate, interdisciplinarity in practice can take various forms, with various results, and often processes of knowledge production labelled as interdisciplinary turn out to be more a kind of multidisciplinary in practice.⁶ It seems that as easy is to prize interdisciplinarity, as difficult is to define its contours, and it is definitely less easy to practice it in an "authentic" way. The discrepancy between the use of interdisciplinarity as a catchword in current day knowledge politics, and the concrete practices of knowledge production bring us to the conclusion that we can not take the concepts of interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity as self evident concepts and practices, but these knowledge production processes and practices shall be subject of analysis and critical reflection.

Bioethics, power and interdisciplinary knowledge production

Bioethics occupies an important place in the field of knowledge production *about* biotechnologies. Although a relatively new discipline, with its engagement with "policy" and "legal or regulatory" issues, bioethics had an amazing development, not only as it regards its influence on decision making processes but from the point of view of its institutionalisation too. Beside the discourses of technology assessment, risk assessment and intellectual property

emphasise unity, synthesis, integration of knowledge with regard to interdisciplinarity. She argues that "the modern concept of interdisciplinarity has been shaped ... by attempts to retain, in many cases, reinstall historical ideas of unity" (Thompson Klein, 1990, p. 22). Schmidt agrees with Thompson-Klein that unity is one element of interdisciplinarity, but he mentions other two essential characteristics: non-reductionism and pluralism (Schmidt, 2007, p. 320).

⁶ About feminist practices of interdisciplinarity see for example Demény et al, 2006; about interdisciplinarity in anthropology (see Marcus, 2008, p. 11; Strathern, 2007).

law, the discourse of bioethics gained special relevance as an instrument for framing issues, ordering new knowledge, and (re)allocating power in issues related to biotechnology (Jasanoff, 2005, p. 28).

According to Kastenhofer due to the development of a techno-scientific culture the former hierarchical relationship between 'hard' and 'soft' sciences might be transformed into a hierarchy between techno-sciences and sciences for accompanying or policy support research (Kastenhofer, 2007, pp. 267-268). What is interesting for us here in relation to bioethics is the fact that bioethics is not only a discipline *about* biotechnology, as it is for example STS, but has the power to make possible (or impossible) certain applications of biotechnology by legitimising them (or not). This is why and how bioethics is connected with power.

According to Foucault a discourse gains power when more people come to accept the particular views associated with that discourse as common knowledge. Within such a discourse it is established what is *right* and what is *wrong*, what is *normal* and what is *deviant*, which are those views, thoughts or actions that are acceptable and which are not. Such discourse, being perceived as being built on some undeniable "truths", comes than to define a particular way of seeing the world, and the particular way of life associated with such "truths" becomes normalised. The power Foucault locates in the power/knowledge complex it manifests itself in the "totalizing" effects of established discourse, which suppresses other ways of thinking, rendering them invisible (Dreyfus - Rabinow, 1982, pp. 193-204). According to Foucault, however, there is neither a single locus nor an identifiable agent of power, yet power is at once constitutive of subjectivity and of possibilities of action and critique. Any powerful discourse is a subtle form of power that lacks rigidity and other discourses can contest it (Foucault, 1982, p. 223).

Biotechnologies turn the traditional "facts of life" into matters of expert judgment and public debate and become a focus for political contests over such issues as the nuclear family or the relations between the sexes (Brodwin, 2001, pp. 1-10). As birth, illness, and death increasingly come under technological control, struggles arise over who should control the body and define its limits and

capacities. Bioethics has an important role in this process. Not only has ethics the power to define new subject positions, but, as Strathern notes, it seems to have the capacity to structure social expectations in such ways as to create new principles of organization (Strathern, 2000, p. 281).⁷ Bioethics discourse on biotechnologies is indeed such a powerful discourse nowadays, which, however, can be and it is challenged by other discourses.⁸

Although the problems raised by biotechnology are truly interdisciplinary in nature, and the body of theoretical knowledge under the name of bioethics has indeed an interdisciplinary character, the methods used to produce new knowledge in the area are mainly rooted in monodisciplinary traditions (Azevêdo, 2007, p. 34).⁹ According to Azevêdo "the contentment with the application of the existing methods will dismiss the need for creative ideas on new interdisciplinary methods in bioethics and this may become the greatest epistemological challenge to bioethics in the present-century" (Azevêdo, 2007, p. 34).

According to Jasanoff, it is still a bioethics lead by various "experts" (medical, legal, bioethicists, scientists) which dominates both the debates and the decisions concerning biotechnology and arguments for a meaningful deliberative politics in relation to biotechnology did not emerged from official bioethics in any of the three countries she has analysed (Jasanoff, 2005, p. 202). If there is no sift in its epistemology, bioethics will remain an expert discourse in the service of the regulatory systems of law and policy.

⁷ Shore and Wright make a similar argument in connection with policy, which is seen as central concept and instrument in organizing contemporary societies. (Shore and Wright, 1999, p. 4, in Strathern, 2000, p. 281.), while Phillips and Lynne in their article about biotechnology and governance bring to our attention the capacity of international organization, in representing the world in way that make populations governable (Phillips and Lynne, 2007, p. 119).

⁸ See for example De Vries - Turner et al, 2007

⁹ Bowden, 1995, p. 72

Social science, bioethics and biotechnology

According to Habermas, the selective readings of norms that have the grammatical form of universal statements but at the semantic level are vulnerable to particularistic interpretations of their basic concepts, such as persons, human being, call for an empirical explanation (Habermas, 2008, p. 285). Proponents of a critical bioethics claim that it is necessary to understand the lived experience of real people in context. Informed by critical social theories they examine social conditions in order to uncover hidden structures, and admit that knowledge is power. According to the adepts of critical bioethics a practice that simply documents the ethical practices of a specific environment could be rather conservative, supporting rather than challenging systems and practices. To avoid this, critical bioethics must be more than purely descriptive, it should be reflexive, it should review theories if they are challenged by practice and last but not least it should be rooted in empirical research (Hedgecoe, 2004, pp. 134-140).

Feminists challenge traditional bioethics to reveal its own perspective(s), to acknowledge and embrace the plurality of human (male and female) voices, to accept and work with the essential nature of human connection and embodiment. As Tong formulated "denial of perspective does not achieve neutrality, denial of plurality does not bring unity, and denial of connection and embodiment does not achieve self-sufficiency for the rational, autonomous self" (Wolf, 1996, p. 89).

Habermas points out that while sociological reservations can offer salutary corrections to normativism, these critiques do not condemn normative theories to failure by social complexity. According to the author, purely normative considerations retain their relevance as long as we accept that complex societies shape themselves in a reflexive manner through law and politics (Habermas, 2008, p. 276). Therefore a framework that incorporates universal principles shall constitute one dimension of an adequate ethical theory in the context of new genetics providing that its principles are formulated in non-exclusionary terms that reflect the relational context of individual lives. What both feminist and critical bioethicists emphasize in connection with universalistic claims in bio-

ethics is the necessity of reflectivity upon such norms and concepts.

The feminist and the critical social scientists perspective could open space for collaboration between bioethics and social sciences, even if this will not result in one integrated theory or approach. Such collaboration could move both disciplines beyond that 'trained incapacity', as Veblen calls the disciplinary perspective, "that renders its holders unable to view the world from a variety of equally valid points of view" (De Vries - Turner, 2007, p. 2). A better collaboration between social scientists and bioethicists at least in the field of the new converging technologies would result on a better understanding of the societal, cultural and ethical implication of new converging technologies. This than, as a result, would lead to an increased possibility for better decisions about the future of these technologies.

The applications of biotechnology raise fundamental question about human existence. These are not only questions for some professional ethicists, or for the anthropology of science and technology. This "science and technology" that is employed in biotechnology might alter the "subject of anthropology": the human being, its relationship and its environment. At present, bioethicists far outnumber social scientists (including anthropologists) on government advisory committees and in different ethics committees where important decisions are made in relation with the future of biotechnological applications. However, in many cases it might happen that the kinds of answers required by these issues are the kinds of things that social scientists are better providing. In more and more instances is admitted that what is often missing is the ethnographically documented cases studies about the application of various technologies. Hedgecoe notes that a number of policy makers at a number of different levels, over the past few years, complained about the lack of empirical evidence relating to topics such as human genetics or surrogacy, for example on how genetics tests affects lives here and now (Hedgecoe, 2004, p. 142). However, although a quite large number of publications demonstrate that the challenges posed by biotechnology have not left unmarked anthropologists' interest, anthropology, as a field of scientific expertise, has only a marginal position and influence when it comes to

policy decisions, public debates or societal regulation of the use of biotechnology.

One of the most influential calls from the part of anthropologists towards anthropological involvement in the field of knowledge production about biotechnology has been formulated by Michael Fischer. Fischer assumes a critical role to anthropology and calls for the production of new social theory, which could provide at least partial meta-narratives for creative thinking about the structuring of the new techno-scientific worlds (Fischer, 2007, p. 580). These suggestions and directions can be seen as an encouragement for anthropology to engage with the new techno-sciences and to open up for interdisciplinary engagements.

Anthropological contribution to the knowledge production related to biotechnology issues could be relevant in a number of ways. Anthropology could provide insight on how social institutions work and might integrate and regulate new technologies, can document "what is actually the case against both the hype of promoters of the new technology and the cautionary tales, as well as fantasies of hope" (Fischer, 2001, p. 356). More than this, anthropology can provide empirical evidence on how the work of bioethics is shaped by "social institutions such as law, religion, politics and emerging global markets" (De Vries - Turner, 2007, p. 4). Anthropology, according to Fischer, can function as check on the mechanisms of abstraction and universalization that frequently characterise the non-anthropological, non-cross-culturally or cross-temporally comparative, social sciences and hence can disrupt macro theoretical models (Fisher, 2007, p. 356).

In this paper I have argued that better collaboration between social scientists and bioethicists in the field of the biotechnology would result on a better understanding of the societal, cultural, economic and ethical implications of biotechnologies, and this would lead to better decisions concerning these technologies. If we take into account that the decisions that are to be taken about biotechnology's present and future can deeply affect central notions of our "culture", such as the concept of nature, human, kinship, family, identity, subject, and the relationship between them, social science in general, and anthropology in particular, should meaningfully contribute to the outcomes of the debates on these issues.

Bioethics, by paying attention to the anthropological and social science perspective, could avoid as being regarded an expert discourse in the service of the regulatory systems of law and policy.

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DEHUMANIZED MAN - IS HE STILL HUMAN(E)? - DECONSTRUCTION OF THE BODY BY TECHNOLOGY

István Zoltán SZABÓ¹

Approaching a bioethical, biotechnological-ethical question from the point of view of philosophy and literary theory is not conventional; it can, however, still turn out to be a fruitful task. On the one hand, it is because literary texts conceptualize problems within bioethics more often and in a more articulated way. On the other hand, it is because the roots of this discipline go back to philosophy and the basis for its terms comes from philosophy. Bioethics is proud of its interdisciplinary nature. That is why it is worth having a sidelong glance at literature - and another at philosophy - and realize their connection, which is doubtless.

At first, let me give a short outline of the literary aspect, since this will lead us to the philosophical component of the presentation. There are such trends in literature, which outrun the literary main-stream in their way of posing questions. These trends - and their texts - take a look into the future from time to time; still, they pose confusing questions, in connection with the most vital topics of our days. Of course, we can find such other "pearls" within literature; however, I am only going to talk about the one which is closest to bioethical questions.

I am going to talk about cyberpunk. This is a relatively young but effective trend of postmodern prose fiction. This fiction is prolific if it somehow reflects reality. If it shows reality from a new point of view, we can become familiar with as yet-unknown cognitions. The key texts of the science-fiction genre have always posed questions that turned into real scientific problems. Actually, these texts have provided the terminological basis of that particular discipline. All one has to do is think of expressions like virtual reality or cyberspace. The novel, which started cyberpunk, was *Neuro-*

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