13

Biopolitics, Biosociality and the Body: Introduction

Ulrike Landfester

The terms 'biopolitics' and 'biosociality' seem at first glance to be hybrids derived from categorically different concepts, one of them – biology – belonging squarely to the so-called 'hard' natural sciences, the other two – politics and society – belonging just as squarely to the scholarly realm of the 'soft' humanities and social sciences. These terms were conceived, however, against the background of a fundamental shift in the perception of the human body that affects the 'hard' as well as the 'soft' sciences. Today, the human body can no longer lay claim to the radical otherness of nature as distinct from the embedding framework of culture. Rather, instead of representing a stronghold of essential subjectivity, it has come to be seen also as a malleable object, its natural elements inextricably bound up in its cultural contexts, both shaping them and being shaped by them or – in the terminology of LCS scholarship – both reading and readable, writing and rewritable.

As this section of the book may appear to breach the traditional disciplinary boundaries of LCS research even more radically than the preceding sections, a few general introductory remarks are called for, especially as natural scientists may deem this terminology too playfully metaphorical to be compatible with their standards of scientific rigour – a real human body, after all, is nothing like a book, a blackboard or even the screen of a laptop computer. Indeed, some of our most heated discussions were sparked by the question of whether metaphors can serve to elucidate complex issues, or whether they constitute an LCS in-group code and therefore might effectively sabotage the endeavour of interdisciplinary communication. This debate was finally laid to rest on the grounds prepared by Clifford Geertz's paradigmatic interpretation of culture as 'a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and

develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life' (Geertz, 1973: 89). Since language is perhaps the most important medium of symbolic representation and as such intrinsically metaphorical, because a word can never even resemble the thing it evokes in the consciousness of its users – seeing that words and things belong to categorically different orders of being – it was agreed that it is part of the LCS research mandate to put forth this metaphorical quality actively as a condition of any communication.

Underlying this issue, there are two arguments to be made for the use of LCS scholarship in dealing with the field of biopolitics, biosociality and the human body, and there is nothing remotely playful about either of them. The first argument concerns the object of LCS research into the status of the human body today. Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics (Foucault, 2004) and the notion of biosociality developed by Paul Rabinow in 1997 are analytical instruments which allow us to focus on the relationship between the political and social – in the widest sense, the cultural – and the organic dimensions of human existence. This existence is shaped by the way the human body is spoken and written about, diagnosed and treated, educated and disciplined, identified according to ethnicity, sex, nationality, and religious and familial affiliation. That means that the human body is subject to mechanisms which are determined by textuality, fictionality, rhetoricity and historicity. Therefore, while LCS research certainly cannot presume on the specialized expertise of the natural sciences, it can use its own specialized expertise in cultural literacy to help understand the ongoing collapse of the divide between culture and nature and its consequences for our understanding of the human body – consequences which are not restricted to the sphere of cultural theory but, as the contributions to this section will show, reach deeply into the engineering sciences, into medicine – especially genetics – and into biology.

The second argument pertains to what sociologist Karin Knorr-Cetina maintains in her ground-breaking book *The Manufacture of Knowledge* (1981). Ever since the natural sciences developed their collective disciplinary identity during the nineteenth century and, in doing so, renounced their historical roots in the ground of the ancient *universitas* which they had originally shared with the humanities and social sciences, their knowledge defined its scientific validity by claiming simply to present given facts. The process of gaining knowledge was understood as a series of operations designed to retrieve information which was already there, waiting to be deciphered and then transmitted as solid truth. While it was universally accepted that the technological

improvement of the means of such retrieval – microscopes, X-rays and, today, computer tomography and similar imaging techniques – would render some former truths obsolete, reflection on the interferences between technology and the information which was generated by it, not to mention reflection on the cultural frameworks determining what research should be funded and how it should be conducted, remained for a long time largely absent from scientific discourse. Even less attention was paid to the potential societal and political impact of research results, an attitude which endorsed, for example, the misuse of the discovery of nuclear fission by Otto Hahn and Luise Meitner in 1938 and ultimately led to the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Again, it is the specialized expertise of LCS scholarship that can contribute towards a new understanding of knowledge as something constructed or, in Knorr-Cetina's term, 'manufactured'. Knowledge is stored and transmitted in texts, enabled and structured by fictional hypotheses, presented in persuasive rhetorical terms and always, on the discursive level as well as in the sphere of objects, crucially influenced by its historical background. To read knowledge from that perspective means to realize that even scientific truth is a construction – and it is no less worthy for that; on the contrary: the means of its construction are in themselves a treasure-trove of knowledge about the ways in which humanity has dealt with the human body.

Both arguments are inherent to the concepts of biopolitics and biosociality. When Michel Foucault first introduced the term '*biopolitique*' [biopolitics] during a lecture series at the Collège de France in 1978–1979,¹ he used it to describe his notion that the physical existence of human beings, both individually and collectively, had long since become an object of political regulation. This, he argued, meant not only that political power laid claim to the human body, but also, inversely, that the body automatically became an active and creative part of politics through social performance. Foucault made explicit an awareness which had implicitly been hovering at the fringes of human consciousness, though it had repeatedly been the subject of literature and the arts: the awareness that the seemingly absolute divide between nature and culture is in itself a human artefact, constructed by Western civilization to stabilize its social and ethical values. Encoded in the Judaeo-Christian founding myth of Adam and Eve's fall from grace which precipitated them out of the innocence of primal nature into the painful self-awareness of a sociopolitical existence regulated by complex rules and precepts, the nature–culture divide had proved so invaluable

over the centuries for governing human communities that it finally came to be viewed as a naturally given thing in itself.

While Foucault did not invent the concept of biopolitics – the term had been coined by the Swedish political scientist Johan Rudolf Kjellén as early as 1916² – the moment when he took it up proved ideal for its productive reception. The debate about culture had recently been thoroughly politicized due to the emancipation movements of the 1970s, which were increasing the public's sensitivity to governmental encroachments on individual freedom. Medical, biological and chemical research, due to the twentieth century's ever-accelerating technological progress, had simultaneously made available not only a hitherto unimaginable amount of knowledge about the human body but also a variety of prosthetic procedures like the introduction of the cardiac pacemaker, an electric device for the stimulation of the heart, which was first implanted in 1958, thereby blurring the boundaries between human and machine. Interestingly enough, though, Foucault himself, as Thomas Lemke has pointed out, still remained 'attached to the idea of an integral body. His analysis of power techniques which are directed at the body to form and fragment it, still relies on the idea of fixed and identifiable bodily borders' (Lemke, 2013: 6). It was left to Donna Haraway to state in 1985, in her famous essay *A Cyborg Manifesto*, the direction in which the developments behind Foucault's ideas were likely to go: 'By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs' (Haraway, 1991: 150).

The image of the human individual as a cyborg which Haraway outlined in her *Manifesto* was meant to be a philosophical vision, owing at least as much to the growing unease engendered by the omnipresence of digital media and their pervading influence on human consciousness as to the rather more physically concrete techniques in which Foucault had been interested. At the same time as she published her essay, however, this vision had already begun to become reality. In 1990 came the founding of the Human Genome Project, an international research project that aimed to decipher the human genome; in 2000 a first draft of the genome was made public, and in 2003 the project was declared complete. Since then, gene sequencing has made it possible to identify and at some future stage perhaps even eliminate hereditary diseases, opening the human genome eventually to proactive intervention or, to remain within the LCS framework, to being rewritten.

It was against the background of the potential released by the Human Genome Project that Paul Rabinow created the term 'biosociality':

In the future the new genetics will cease to be a biological metaphor for modern society and will become instead a circulation network of identity terms and restriction loci, around which and through which a truly new type of autoproduction will emerge, which I call 'biosociality'. If sociobiology is culture constructed on the basis of a metaphor of nature, then in biosociality nature will be modeled on culture understood as practice.

(Rabinow, 1997 [1992]: 99)

In other words, he postulates that the new genetics introduced by the Human Genome Project would enable humankind to control its reproduction in a wholly new way, opening up a whole new panorama of eugenics. Henceforth humankind would no longer be limited to contraception, with the result of the birth still being, so to speak, left in the hands of nature; instead, people would be able to shape the hereditary characteristics of their offspring by rewriting the genome according to criteria defined by cultural needs and desires, thus effectively once and for all abolishing the long-established divide between culture and nature.

In the face of what the Human Genome Project has already made possible and, even more so, in anticipation of what in all probability will be discovered and deployed in the future, the collapse of the culture–nature divide inevitably entails a realignment of the relationship between the 'hard' and the 'soft' sciences. A belief in their fundamental methodological incompatibility, which was first articulated by Wilhelm Dilthey in 1883 (Dilthey, 1883: 5–25) and critically underlined by C.P. Snow's Rede lecture on *The Two Cultures* in 1959, may certainly have helped both sides establish highly efficient intellectual identities; but, in the light of the developments sketched out above, it is appropriate and, indeed, high time to explore methodological synergies – without amateurishly encroaching on each other's specialized areas of expertise, but equally without shying away from productive cooperation.

In this spirit, the three essays in this section, which developed out of the St Gallen workshop, explore several interfaces between disciplines that have hitherto worked on the questions outlined above more or less in isolation from each other. Heather Bradshaw-Martin explores the relationship between fictionality and ethical considerations in the field of technological enhancement of the human body. She argues that while, on the one hand, fictionality is traditionally perceived as being categorically different from the real and, on the other hand, technical objects are seen to be firmly lodged in reality, fictionality is in fact not only

crucial to the development of such objects but an intrinsic part of them even when they are finished and thus considered 'real'. Therefore, as the transfer or 'upload' of the human mind to materials other than the biological matter of the body becomes a distinct technological possibility, fictionality needs to be cultivated as a means to shape the ethical dimension of technologies which will then pertain to kinds of vulnerability different from those of the human body as we know it today.

Along similar lines, Marianne Sommer shows how the possibilities offered by the progress in genetics research affect the concept of human identity far beyond the technical aspects of deciphering the human genome. As commercial companies started to offer customized services to clients who wished to access their individual history through the information contained in their genes, it quickly became clear that there is a widespread desire to define one's identity by finding 'genetic cousins' which is not satisfied by and can even subvert the family, ethnic or national semantics that have hitherto characterized human culture. Thus the use of genetics advances a new reflection of culture as a process which is constantly de- and renaturalizing what 'identity' means.

Uwe Wirth, finally, focuses on yet another kind of interface – the semantic interferences between the horticultural techniques of grafting and hybridization as methods for combining the features of different plants to improve their yield and the discourse on plagiarism, translation and transcription in literature, where these terms have been used as heuristic metaphors since the era of the Enlightenment. He shows that such metaphorical use is by no means incidental but is linked to concrete historical endeavours to deal with the dissolving of the boundaries between culture and nature, employing horticultural expertise to understand and encode the emerging processes of intercultural transfer and networking.

Notes

1. The series was later published under the title *Naissance de la Biopolitique*; see Foucault (2004).
2. See Lemke (2011: 9–10).

Works cited

- Dilthey, Wilhelm (1883) *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften. Versuch einer Grundlegung für das Studium der Gesellschaft und der Geschichte*, Bd. 1 (Leipzig: Duncker und Humblot).

- Foucault, Michel (2004) *Naissance de la biopolitique. Cours au Collège de France 1978–1979* (Paris: Seuil).
- Geertz, Clifford (1973) *Thick Description: Towards an Interpretative Theory of Culture* (New York: Basic Books).
- Haraway, Donna (1991 [1985]) 'A cyborg manifesto: Science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century', in Donna Haraway (ed.) *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge), 149–181.
- Knorr-Cetina, Karin (1981) *The Manufacture of Knowledge. An Essay on the Constructivist and Contextual Nature of Science* (Oxford: Pergamon Press).
- Lemke, Thomas (2011) *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction* (New York: NYU Press).
- Lemke, Thomas (2013) *Biopolitics and Beyond: On the Reception of a Vital Foucauldian notion*: http://www.biopolitica.cl/docs/Biopolitics_and_beyond.pdf (accessed 16 December 2013).
- Rabinow, Paul (1997) *Essays on the Anthropology of Reason* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- Snow, C. P. (1959) *The Two Cultures* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press).