BiosInq Seminar Series

Overview - list of speakers

Date	Speaker	Location
24/9/2024 15:00-16:30	Tim Ingold (online)	AIAS, Building 1632, room 212
8/10/2024 15:00-16:30	Alex Nading (online)	AIAS, Building 1632, room 212
22/10/2024 15:00-16:30	Amber Benezra (online)	AIAS, Building 1632, room 212
5/11/2024 15:00-16:30	Charlotte Brives (online)	AIAS, Building 1630, room 101
19/11/2024 15:00-16:30	Nancy Chen (online)	AIAS, Building 1632, room 212
26/11/2024 15:00-16:30	Mette Nordahl Svendsen (in person)	AIAS, Building 1632, room 212

24/9/2024 Tim Ingold, University of Aberdeen

Evolution without Inheritance: Steps to an Ecology of Learning

Attempts to integrate human culture, history, or symbolic imagination into a comprehensive theory of evolution have, up to now, foundered on a bifurcation between mind and nature deeply embedded in the project of modern science. This article attempts to overcome the bifurcation by foregrounding the process of learning, understood neither as the lifetime expression of evolved attributes nor as a supplementary (nongenetic) mechanism for their inheritance but as an intergenerational life process unfolding in a matrix of relations that overflows the emergent boundaries between organisms and their environments. The argument is presented in three steps. The first is to explain how a distinction between life and inheritance came to be built into the "modern synthesis" of evolutionary biology. In the second step, this synthesis is shown to have been stymied by its failure to deliver an adequate account of the role of ontogenesis in evolution. Of the several attempts to rectify this failure by extending the synthesis, the article focuses on just one, which introduces the paired concepts of "niche construction" and "ecological inheritance." The third step reveals that the residual commitment of such an extended evolutionary synthesis to the logic of inheritance leaves it compromised. To resolve the impasse, the article proposes a revitalized theory of learning that promises to unify the fields of evolution and ecology. This can be achieved, however, only by relinquishing the concept of inheritance.

Bio

Following 25 years at the University of Manchester, where Tim Ingold was appointed Max Gluckman Professor of Social Anthropology in 1995, Ingold moved in 1999 to Aberdeen, where he established the UK's newest Department of Anthropology, as well as directing the University's strategic research theme on 'The North' (2011-17). He has carried out ethnographic fieldwork among Saami and Finnish people in Lapland, and has written on comparative questions of environment, technology and social organisation in the circumpolar North, as well as on the role of animals in human society, on issues in human ecology, and on evolutionary theory in anthropology, biology and history. From there, he went on to explore the links between environmental perception and skilled practice, with a view to replacing traditional models of genetic and cultural transmission with a relational approach focusing on the growth of embodied skills of perception and action within social and environmental contexts of development. In his more recent research, he has pursued three lines of inquiry that emerged from his earlier work, concerning the dynamics of pedestrian movement, the creativity of practice, and the linearity of writing.

8/10/2024 Alex Nading, Cornell University

Toxic Mediation in the Nicaraguan Sugarcane Zone

In the sugarcane plantations of western Nicaragua, environmental health activists are working to confront an epidemic of "chronic kidney disease of non-traditional causes" (CKDnt). Many plantation residents insist that this disease, which was unknown until the 1990s, is related to exposure to toxic pesticides used by plantation companies, but as environmental justice scholars have demonstrated, documenting such exposure is exceedingly difficult. Because toxic damage was sometimes painfully obvious and other times merely possible, residents had to develop creative ways to keep attention on the problem. Rather than see toxicity as simply a question of material interactions between bodies and chemicals, this chapter illustrates how people in the sugarcane zone worked to make toxicity legible through a variety of media, including the oral sharing of stories and the exchange of videos and photographs on platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp. By rethinking toxic worlds as mediated worlds, people in the sugarcane zone found a method for questioning the premises of both pesticide regulation and toxicology. If toxicity is made in the circulation of narratives, and not just in the circulation of molecules, then the media of telecommunication, digital photography, and storytelling become essential tools in environmental politics.

Bio

Alex Nading is a medical and environmental anthropologist. His research, mostly focused on Nicaragua, has examined transnational campaigns against dengue fever, bacterial disease, and chronic kidney disease, as well as grassroots movements to address these issues. Through ethnographic methods, Alex brings the theoretical concerns of medical anthropology together with those of critical environmental studies and science and technology studies.

22/10/2024 Amber Benezra, Stevens Institute of Technology

Title and Abstract: TBC

Bio

Amber Benezra is a sociocultural anthropologist researching how studies of the human microbiome intersect with biomedical ethics, public health/technological infrastructures, and care. In partnership with human microbial ecologists, she is developing an "anthropology of microbes" to address global health problems across disciplines.

5/11/2024 Charlotte Brives, Emile Durkheim Centre

Title and Abstract: TBC

Bio

Charlotte Brives currently works at the Centre Emile Durkheim, French National Centre for Scientific Research. Charlotte does research in Qualitative Social Research, STS and Medical Anthropology. She works on the relationships between humans and microbes, in particular through two projects, one on phage therapy (the use of bacteriophage viruses to treat bacterial infections) and the other on human microbiota. This work led her to develop empirical work and conceptual thinking about AMR.

19/11/2024 Nancy Chen, University of California, Santa Cruz

Title and Abstract: TBC

26/11/2024 Mette Nordahl Svendsen, Copenhagen University

Terrestrial Futures: The Non-Imagination of Ecological Peril in Precision Medicine

In this talk, I take an interest in temporal 'non-imagination' (Prainsack 2022). In political discussions and conversations among central actors in precision medicine in the Global North, I point to the absence—a non-imagination—of treating present and future environmental collapse as relevant to the field, despite the field's huge energy consumption. This non-imagination raises questions about how medical anthropology may approach and theorize the earthly connection of the 'life politics' at the center of anthropological studies of the life sciences. In light of the current ecological peril, I advocate for extending our focus from the governance of life in politics, labs, and clinics to the governance of earth-life.

Bio

Mette N. Svendsen is Professor in the Centre for Medical Science and Technology Studies at the University of Copenhagen. Her research explores ethical and existential dimensions of medical science and technology. Theoretically, her work has crafted dialogues between science and technology studies, medical anthropology, and public health. Methodologically, she has developed innovative comparative approaches to investigate life and its value. She is the author of the monograph *Near Human: Border Zones of Life, Species, and Belonging* published by Rutgers University Press (2022).