

BIOSECURITY

A response to Helmreich, AT 21(2)

In their article Collier et al. proposed to study the emergent biosecurity apparatus from the perspective of 'second-order observers'. In his response, Stefan Helmreich raises two objections: firstly that they fail to reflect on their own complicity with the biosecurity apparatus, and secondly, that they erroneously believe that they are able to observe the hard-pressed actors operating under the conditions of 'a modern, accelerated present from the unhurried time of second-order observers'. I believe that both objections are ill-founded.

Helmreich's claim that Collier et al. aspire to take up 'an exterior temporal location' is based on a somewhat strained reading of their article. Helmreich misconstrues the authors' critique of the 'rush to epochal proclamation, prompting a harried practical response' that has occurred with regard to recent advances in genomics, the break-up of the Soviet Union and the attacks of 11 September 2001. The authors are in fact criticizing rash epochal and prophetic interpretations that pretend to understand how a certain event will shape the future when the event has only just taken place. It is unclear how Helmreich manages to extract a claim to the 'unhurried time of second-order observers' from this. The term 'second-order observation' is borrowed from the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann. It is defined as the observation of other, first-order observations about the world. Nowhere does Luhmann suggest that 'second-order observations' are less pressed for time than 'first-order observations'. In fact, their timing depends intrinsically on the timing of the first-order observations. Considering that a recent book by Rabinow and Dan-Cohen (2005), based on second-order observations, took nine months to complete, it seems implausible to assume that the practice of second-order observation must be more leisurely than traditional 'participant observation'.

Helmreich's doubts as to whether the approach proposed by Collier et al. is sufficiently self-reflective actually raise two questions: (1) whether their conceptualization of what they will be doing leaves room for self-reflection regarding their own involvement in the field, and (2) whether they will actually maintain such reflexivity in their fieldwork. The latter question is purely speculative and cannot be answered yet. As to the first, Helmreich proposes an answer which appears to be based on a misunderstanding. His reading of the authors' methodological conceptions and his own comprehension of what an anthropologist does in the field lead him to question the adequacy of the authors' description of what they will be doing. He suggests that their emphasis on second-order observation implies more distance than one can possibly gain in the field, and thereby conceals the participatory aspect of 'participant observation'. Helmreich writes: '[P]articipation is [...] always invested in partially shared concerns. Such investments cannot, I think, be relegated to the level of "first-order" affairs from which we need "second-order" disengagement. While such parsing makes for an intriguing theoretical distinction, first- and second-order observation

are not so easy to distinguish, disentangle or defend in practice.'

There seem to be some misunderstandings here. First, the article does not propose second-order observation as a substitute for participant observation. Instead, Rabinow, for instance, has used the terms 'fieldwork in philosophy' and the German neologism 'Wissensarbeitsforschung' to designate his practice. Whatever it is called, any anthropological practice will comprise both first- and second order observations.

Secondly, while it might well be that the anthropologists share certain concerns with their informants, this does not automatically 'relegate' these concerns to 'first-order affairs'. In fact, many informants are engaged in second-order observations themselves. The anthropologist, on the other hand, is likely to share their interest in the objects of their first-order observations. Luhmann writes: 'A second-order observer is always also a first-order observer inasmuch as he has to pick out another observer as his object in order to see through him (however critically) the world' (1997: 1117; my translation). Still, discursively this does not impede the distinction between first- and second-order observations. After all, a statement about how a microbiologist observes an anthrax spore can hardly be mistaken for a statement about the spore itself. Helmreich may be right that the anthropologist's own first-order observations will inevitably influence his second-order observations. From Luhmann's description of the position of the second-order observer it follows that no matter how self-reflexive, the observer will always have his or her own blind spot of observation. There is no transcendental subject position. Every observation takes place *within* the world. Therefore, Helmreich's expression "'second-order" disengagement' reveals a misunderstanding of Luhmann's concept of second-order observation. Second-order observation does not imply any disengagement from or exteriority to the world observed (nor does it imply a hierarchy as Helmreich's use of the verb 'to relegate' suggests). Of course, an anthropologist engaged in second-order observations of his or her informants' first-order observations is as much situated in the field as they are. He simply looks at it from a different angle.

Helmreich's criticism of the purported lack of self-reflexivity in the epistemological position of Collier et al. culminates in two rhetorical questions: 'Will they really only observe?' and 'Are they confident anthropology itself might not be enlisted as a genre of expertise to be inserted into [the] biosecurity apparatus?' Anthropologists, of course, do not only observe. By talking with their informants they engage with them in a form of interaction from which both sides can possibly profit intellectually.

But Helmreich's question about whether the authors will 'really only observe' expresses, as the second question makes clear, not so much an epistemological as an ethical objection. What he wants to point out is this: had they only been more self-reflexive, the authors would have been less confident that their observations and their discussions with their informants will not benefit the biosecurity apparatus. But Helmreich gives no answer to the question


of why it would be undesirable to aid those working in the field of biosecurity in being more self-reflexive and, hence, aware of the contingency of their first-order observations. Helmreich's inarticulate uneasiness about the emergent biosecurity apparatus resonates with a widely felt discomfort in academia. But for this very reason, an interior view such as the one Collier et al. intend to provide promises to be an indispensable contribution to an informed public debate about the problem of biosecurity and the emergent responses to it.

Of course, there can be no absolute certainty that the knowledge thereby produced will not be used for a purpose not intended. To me, the risk of not knowing seems significantly higher than the risks accompanying the field studies proposed by Collier et al. The first lesson to be learned from their anthropology of biosecurity might well be that there is no security, but only risk, and that this does not excuse us from proceeding – in terms of research as well as policy. The real question is how and in which direction to proceed. It is in this arena that anthropological enquiry can contribute to the public debate.

Nicolas Langlitz

University of California, Berkeley,
langlitz@berkeley.edu

Stefan Helmreich replies:

In his response to my comment on Collier et al.'s proposal for an anthropology of biosecurity, Langlitz offers a clarification of Niklas Luhmann's distinction between first- and second-order observation, a formulation Collier et al. borrow to designate modes of attention characteristic of subjects (informants and ethnographers, in this case) differently attuned to an empirical reality. In response to my queries about whether these genres of attention might entail distinct attitudes toward time, space and ethics – perhaps setting up an analytic and epistemological hierarchy – Langlitz suggests that 'an anthropologist engaged in second-order observations of his or her informants' first-order observations is as much situated in the field as they are. He simply looks at it from a different angle.' 

Such looking, I submit, is far from simple. Anthropological perspectives unfold in time and space: they are forever under construction. When Collier et al. write that the first-order observer 'assumes a "tight coupling of observations and reality"' and is concerned with truth statements, while second-order observers see only 'loose couplings', the question must arise of how observers obtain such positionings, and of how and whether first- and second-order observations can remain distinct amidst the complexities of fieldwork in real time.

Langlitz worries that my questions mask an unreflective ethical anxiety – an anxiety he seeks to allay by describing the outcome of applied Luhmannism, suggesting that second-order-observation-motivated dialogue with informants might make these people 'more self-reflexive and, hence, aware of the contingency of their first-order observations'. This model of the anthropological tutoring of the informant itself articulates an ethical claim. The claim is expanded when Langlitz contends, of ethnographic knowledge of biosecurity, that 'there can be no absolute certainty

that the knowledge thereby produced will not be used for a purpose not intended. To me, the risk of not knowing seems significantly higher than the risks accompanying the field studies proposed by Collier et al.' On this view, knowledge becomes a good in itself.

I do not read Collier et al. as promising anything so neat: their own epistemological premises and ethical promises are more tentative. After all, theirs is a project yet to be undertaken. The Luhmannian distinctions to which Langlitz calls attention cannot guarantee in advance how they might organize any given ethnographic encounter.

In a famous comedy routine, Abbott and Costello talk past one another about a baseball team peopled by players with names like

'Who', 'What', and 'I don't know'. When Costello asks Abbott, 'Who's on first [base]?' and is repeatedly told, to his growing consternation, 'Who's on first!' we hear interlocutors for whom first- and second-order observations are forever trading places. In a related register, I suggest that we have a bit of cross-talking on both sides of the present exchange – with each of us seeking to locate anthropologists and their ethical attitudes by asking 'Who's on first?' and 'What's on second?' – our overlapping but differently ordered answers themselves a sign of the always negotiated, shape-shifting character of our discussions, amongst ourselves as well as with our interlocutors.

Indeed, what is attractive to me about Collier et al.'s project is the way it is

enmeshed in the apparatus it would describe, just the kind of anthropological project we need. This is why I want to know more about the complexities of method entailed in following and participating in what the authors have so compellingly identified as the 'problematization' of biosecurity. I heartily second Langlitz' observation that the 'real question is how and in which direction to proceed'. ●

Stefan Helmreich

Massachusetts Institute of Technology
sgh2@mit.edu

- Luhmann, N 1997. *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, 2 vols. Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp.
Rabinow, P. and Dan-Cohen, T. 2005, *A machine to make a future. Biotech chronicles*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.