



Laurea / B. A. in Global Governance

The challenges of biocultural diversity: life, technology, and human knowledge

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This course module is divided into two parts. The first part introduces the concept of biocultural diversity, and explores the effects of current global socioeconomic and environmental processes on biological species, the ecosystem and human cultural and linguistic groups, including their traditional knowledge. Over the next thirty years, 20 percent of the world's species may cease to exist, and by the end of this century, only half of the 6,912 distinct human languages in the world may still be spoken. Although biodiversity and linguistic loss are relatively well-known phenomena, less widely known is the connection between global media, technological standards, knowledge control and homogenization. Social inequalities, life patents, bio-politics and the suppression of cultural diversity seem to be part of the same project, serving the interests of a small number of northern politic-economic élites. In the words of Boaventura de Sousa Santos, the northern hemisphere has been responsible for an *epistemicide*, or “the failure to recognize the different ways of knowing by which people across the globe run their lives and provide meaning to their existence.” In order to hold back these processes, and achieve the goals of biocultural diversity conservation and sustainability on Earth, Western epistemological models and ways of thinking need to change. Examples of new theoretical frameworks and approaches will be described, and case studies from different regions of the world, where work is being carried out to prevent erosion of the *human knowledge base*. The Paris 2001 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity will be used as a starting point for the final discussion http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13179&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html. The second part will focus on more specific issues related to biological complexity, genetic variability, and symbolic variation. This will begin with a discussion of the structures and dynamics of life, starting from the Lamarckian definition of living and non-living matter, as an early paradigmatic “complex” vision of matter. This will then be compared with the mechanistic vision of the Modern Era, starting from the “Manifesto” of the medical materialists of 1847 and their concept of the “substantial equivalence” of living and non-living matter. The evolution of humans will then be discussed, focusing on their differences from the other primates, caused by the acceleration of changes in a small number of genes, which strikingly modified the ratio between the neo-cortex and the remaining part of the brain, allowing the production of complex languages and a massively increased capacity for information exchange. The difference between human behaviors and those of other living beings will also be discussed in more philosophical terms, taking into account the general vision of the philosopher Hans Jonas and his definition of three paradigmatic objects and concepts specific to our species, and their effects on human behavior and history. Jonas's *Principle of responsibility* will be introduced as a tool for characterizing three levels of alienation from human living matter: 1) the birth and early times of our species, 2) a mechanistic Promethean utopia of mechanization of the world, and 3) the present “suicidal” behavior based substituting the material modification of matter for an improvement in human lives through a virtual, technological-financial dimension. Finally, different periods of history will be analyzed in terms of the rise and fall of the human capacity to exchange information, as influenced by available tools and media.

Each of these sections will be followed by a hands-on session and a collective discussion.

The course will enjoy also the active participation of external experts, professionals and stakeholders who will offer original views and give practical insights into the realm of biocultural diversity and the geopolitics of knowledge.

Bibliography and links

De Sousa Santos, B. (2014), *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide*, Boulder, Paradigm Publishers.

Buiatti, M. (2004), *Il benevolo disordine della vita. La diversità dei viventi fra scienza e società*, Torino, UTET.

Buiatti, M. – Buiatti, M. (2008), “The Chance vs. Necessity Antinomy and Third Millennium Biology”, *Biology Forum*, 101: 29-66.

Fiormonte, D. (2012), “Towards a Cultural Critique of Digital Humanities”, *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung*, 37, 3: 59-76.

Harrison, K. D. (2007), *When Languages Die. The Extinction of the World's Languages and the Erosion of Human Knowledge*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Jablonka, E. – Lamb, M. (2004), *Four Dimensions Evolution*, Cambridge, MIT Press.

Maffi, L. (2001) (ed.), *On Biocultural Diversity. Linking Language, Knowledge, and the Environment*. Washington and London, Smithsonian Institution Press.

Maffi, L. – Woodley, E. (eds.) (2010), *Biocultural Diversity Conservation. A Global Sourcebook*, Washington and London, Earthscan.

Mignolo, W. (2000), *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.

Oksanen, M. – Pietarinen, J. (2004), *Philosophy and Biodiversity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Links

<http://www.terralingua.org/>

<http://www.ethnologue.com/>

<http://www.universitalantidea.org/2013/07/04/biologia-e-cultura/> (see “Materiali del corso”)

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