

27.11 Phil Macnaghten (University of Durham)

Humans, animals and the timely appeal to nature

Abstract

It is commonly theorised in the social sciences that the boundaries between animals and humans are fast becoming blurred, dissolved, or at least radically transformed through an assortment of technological, cultural and social processes. In such times it is difficult to fix categories to ground ethical discourse and praxis, about what constitutes right and good conduct. Traditional categories, typically configured using 'rights' or 'welfare' discourse, appear overly static and unable to capture the profundity of what becomes possible at the socio-technical interface, especially when propelled by logics of global capitalism. In this talk I explore the forms of argumentation employed by participants in a public engagement process aimed to examine sensitivities to genetically modified (GM) animals, paying particular attention to discourses of nature and the natural and their utilisation in response to current and prospective uses of animal biotechnology. Far from depicting a nostalgic and irrational essentialism, it is argued that appeals to nature provide a repertoire in which people can articulate underlying tensions between 'moral' and 'instrumental' approaches to animals and express wider unease about science, technological modernity, and hubris symbolised in graphic form by the figure of the GM animal.

About the speaker

Phil Macnaghten is Professor of Geography and Director of the Institute of Hazard and Risk Research (IHRR). He holds a degree in Psychology (1987, Southampton) and a PhD in Social Psychology (1991, Exeter). He is a Honorary Professor in the Institute for Advanced Studies at Lancaster University, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, and a Senior Associate of Demos. He has given many invited international talks and he collaborates with 5 international research projects: in US (Arizona State University and Michigan State University), Finland (University of Lapland and University of Tampere) and Brazil (Federal University of Catarina). Currently, he advises the UK Economic and Social Research Board on Nanotechnology and Society matters, is a founding member of the International Nanotechnology and Society Network, and a member of the UK Nanotechnologies Standardization Committee NTI/1.

Reading

- Macnaghten P, 2004, "Animals in their nature: a case study on public attitudes to animals, genetic modification and 'nature'" *Sociology* 38 533 – 551

Further reading

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