

---

## Books Forum

### How autism entered an identity politics of the brain

Edited by Nicolas Langlitz

Department of Anthropology, The New School for Social Research, New York, USA.

E-mail: LanglitN@newschool.edu

*BioSocieties* (2017).

doi:10.1057/s41292-017-0074-z

Diversity is a supreme late-modern value, always under threat, always in need of defense. In recent decades, it has shaped a wide range of discourses and practices – from conservationist efforts to preserve biodiversity to the multiculturalist struggle to save cultural diversity from a politics of assimilation (Vidal and Dias, 2015). From this appraisal of diversity emerged an activism that seeks to protect the so-called neurodiversity of people living with autism against biomedical efforts to provide treatments that would make everybody a neurotypical. This Books Forum reviews new publications that examine how a multiplicity of embattled identities have mushroomed around autism research and diagnoses.

Greg Hollin presents Steve Silberman as both an actor and a scribe of the history of autism. Silberman's widely read *WIRED* article "The Geek Syndrome" about the high prevalence of autism in Silicon Valley led many readers to test their Autism Quotient (AQ), locating themselves somewhere along a normal curve according to which all of us

are more or less autistic (Silberman, 2001). Politically and ethically, Hollin embraces Silberman's promotion of neurodiversity, but historiographically he questions the claim of Silberman's new book *NeuroTribes* that only the unfortunate influence of Leo Kanner, one of the discoverers of autism, thwarted the recognition of different neurotribal identities.

Chloe Silverman reviews Des Fitzgerald's *Tracing Autism* as a sociological study of how neuroscientists deal with their own epistemic uncertainties. Like Tobias Rees' laboratory ethnography *Plastic Reason* (2016), it could be read as a "fieldwork in skepticism" (Langlitz, 2017). The Archimedean point of the doubtful neuroscience of autism is the certainty that this mental disorder exists as a natural kind. Silverman finds it troubling that brain researchers continue to look for a cure at a time when many people living with the diagnosis no longer conceive of themselves as mentally ill.

Both the books and the reviews presented in this forum bespeak an appreciation of diversity. Maybe it's time to examine how this sensibility became so commonsensical.

## References

- Langlitz, N. (2017) Fieldwork in skepticism: How an anthropologist learns to cultivate doubt and other virtues in a French neuroscience laboratory. *Dialectical Anthropology* 228: 1–5.
- Rees, T. (2016) *Plastic Reason: An Anthropology of Brain Science in Embryogenetic Terms*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Silberman, S. (2001) The Geek Syndrome. *WIRED Magazine* 9(12): 175–183.
- Vidal, F. and Dias, N., eds. (2015) *Endangerment, Biodiversity and Culture*. New York: Routledge.

---

**Nicolas Langlitz** is an Associate Professor at The New School for Social Research in New York. He is the author of *Neuropsychedelia: The Revival of Hallucinogen Research since the Decade of the Brain* and currently studies the intersection of primatology and the human sciences in chimpanzee ethnography.