

ANTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE OF SYNTHETIC BIOLOGY: SOME CHALLENGES FOR SLOVENIA AS A COUNTRY WITH WEAK STAKEHOLDER NETWORKS

Franc Mali, University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences

Toni Pustovrh, University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences

Abstract for STS Conference Graz 2014 - "Critical Issues in Science and Technology Studies" - GRAZ, AUSTRIA, May 05-06, 2014

-- Special Session 10: Societal discourse on Synthetic Biology

Generally speaking, the aim of synthetic biology (SB), which is rapidly becoming one of the leading converging paradigms in modern science and technology, is to re-design existing biological systems and design de novo biological parts or systems that do not exist in nature, to create "biological machines" with functions useful to humans. Although some future visions of its benefits and risks relate to a very distant time horizon of a future (transhuman) society, or even to eschatological questions (basic philosophical dilemmas of how to demarcate the categories of "natural" and "artificial" life), such visions remain a legitimate part of practically-oriented policy agendas. Recently, especially in the scope of the EU framework for Responsible Research and Innovation, attempts to engage various societal stakeholders in envisioning desirable developmental trajectories have been given increasing importance. In our contribution, we will attempt to show the importance of establishing realistic future development scenarios in order to avoid past mistakes, such as with the introduction of agricultural GM plants. The examples will mostly pertain to intellectual property rights (patenting versus open source) and biosafety (proactionary versus precautionary approach). Our empirical conclusions regarding the situation in Slovenia will be based on the results of our qualitative research, that is, in-depth interviews with representatives of different societal actors faced with challenges related to SB in Slovenia, which will be conducted in the first quarter of 2014. The qualitative research among the selected group of Slovenian stakeholders will be carried out as the part of EU FP7 project "Synthetic biology – Engaging with New and Emerging Science and Technology in Responsible Governance of the Science and Society Relationship". Although the selected group of interviewees cannot be said to speak for the entire population of stakeholders, the content analysis of their opinions will give us the possibility to make some (tentative) assessments of how to approach the complex issues of anticipatory governance of SB in Slovenia.