

CALL FOR PAPERS FOR A CONFERENCE

SUI GENERIS OR/AND ENTANGLED?: RETHINKING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CULTURE AND ECOLOGY

Organizers:

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In a recent publication in which they advocate for an ecological reconceptualization of sociology, John Smith and Anna Wilson, make the following claim:

The founding premise ... is that the Enlightenment philosophy of the formal subject and its legacy in the concepts of sui generic social phenomena and social construction are fundamentally non-ecological and refer to the non-living. (Smith & Wilson, 2024, p. 1)

Rather than following one of the dogmas in evolutionary biology, namely that change is caused by chance, they explore theories of the 'next-adjacent possible' (Kauffman, 2019) that situates social change within an ecological context. Social change occurs through a process they call "auto-eco-organisation", which suggests that any kind of change emerges from being doubly constrained, i.e., through auto-organisation as well as eco-organisation. Life and society-culture emerge because they are self-organised and simultaneously organised or constrained by their existence in an ecology.

If their argument holds, the implication would be that culture also needs to be reconceptualised as entangled with physical and biological dynamics and thus as a fundamentally ecological field of study.

It is not without reason that sociology and cultural studies have tried to steer away from these physical and biological entanglements. For one, these fields needed to provide a rationale for their existence, and that impetus tends to lead to the sui generis argument. For another, the history of humanity is rife with examples of the abuse of biological knowledge in social-cultural constructions. That said, we agree with the basic premise of Smith and Wilson that the Anthropocene or ecological crisis requires a reconceptualization of the entanglement between the cultural, the biological and the physical.

We realise that rethinking culture in ecological terms is a massive endeavour, which is why we invite scholars to think with us about this dilemma. In earlier work, we addressed a few initial aspects of this problem (Marais, et al., 2024). In addition to Smith and Wilson, we also have recourse to translation-studies authors such as Blumczynski (2023), Campbell and Vidal (2024), Cronin (2017), Haapaniemi (2024; 2025), Robinson (2017), Valler (2024) and Vidal (2026). The groundbreaking work of Terrence Deacon (2013; 2022) and the biosemiotic collective can further guide explorations (Coble, 2016; Kull, 2015; Wheeler, 2006). While we build on biosemiotic insights, including the essential role of semiosis in the structuring of ecologies, we suggest that the debate can be developed further by adding a different perspective. In addition to asking how mind emerged from matter, as Deacon did, we would like to investigate how "absentials" like mind or semiosis, once emerged, constrain both the non-living and the living. Marais (2023) suggested that the biological affordances of human

bodies could be a starting point from which to explore the ecological entanglement of the non-living, the living and society-culture, but that is a starting point at best.

We invite scholars to explore these delightful mysteries with us during a face-to-face, three-day conference planned for 2-4 June 2027 in Leuven, Belgium. Apart from the keynote presentations, we have space for 18 speakers. We plan to distribute these spaces to speakers from a variety of disciplines, as far as possible. Each day also includes two hour-long round table discussions to flesh out the insights and issues in the debate. The conference will be open for non-presenters to attend.

Seeing that we are planning an edited volume from this conference, we request accepted speakers to prepare their manuscripts for submission shortly after the conference.

The following questions could be guidelines for thinking about the problem but are clearly not the only ones:

1. What, if anything, does an ecological approach contribute to our understanding of society-culture?
2. Would a deeper understanding of society-culture as physically and biologically instantiated or constrained contribute to a wiser ecological position for humans? If so how and why? If not, how, and why not?
3. Apart from biosemiotics, where can scholars look for answers to these questions?
4. Is it possible to reconcile an ecological view with a constructivist/idealist view, seeing that materialists like Barad (2007) and sociologists like Smith and Wilson are quite sceptical about the latter?
5. What needs to be done conceptually to be able to explain society-culture as a physically and biologically instantiated phenomenon?
6. What methodologies would be useful for doing empirical research on society-culture as a physically and biologically instantiated phenomenon?
7. How do current biosemiotic and philosophical views influence this debate?
8. Could complexity theory provide a conceptual framework for undertaking the work assumed above, and if so, how?
9. How do alternative philosophies (Eastern, African, indigenous) contribute to exploring the issues at stake?

We confirm the following key-note speakers:

- Prof Michael Cronin, Professor of French in the Department of French at Trinity College Dublin
- Prof Kalevi Kull, Professor of Biosemiotics in the Department of Semiotics, University of Tartu
- Prof Anna Wilson, Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies in the School of Education, University of Glasgow

Abstracts of between 250 and 400 words can be sent to jmarais@ufs.ac.za before 15 September 2026.

Conference date: 2-4 June 2027

Conference place: KU Leuven

Conference mode: Face-to-face

Registration: Details about registration will be communicated in due course.

References

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