

## Obituary



New York University

## Dorothy Nelkin

*New York University sociologist and expert on science and society.*

*Born Boston, USA, July 30, 1933; died from cancer on May 28, 2003, aged 69 years.*

Think of science as making a contract with its supporters in the wider society. Once, the terms of the contract were pretty simple. In return for money, researchers would deliver a range of goodies—cures for disease, industrial innovation, strong defence, and even a measure of understanding for its own sake. This was roughly the arrangement in developed democracies after World War II, and saw a huge increase in state support for research that lasted into the 1960s. Since then, relations between scientists and technologists and their public and paymasters have grown more complex, and the old social contract is up for renegotiation.

Dorothy Wolfers Nelkin, a sociologist and legal scholar, was in the thick of that renegotiation for the last 30 years of her career. Trained initially in philosophy at Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, USA, where she graduated in 1954, she began her research career 10 years later with sociological and anthropological studies of Pan-Africanism and migrant workers. But a study of nuclear power controversies alerted her to the range of issues emerging around the politics of expertise and the social control of science. Since 1970, she devoted her attention to the relation between science and society, which she chronicled through a series of studies, many of which turned into important books. As her close colleague Susan Lindee, Associate Professor of History and Sociology of Science at the University of Pennsylvania, said: “She more or less invented controversy studies in science and technology. She kept her attention focused on that complicated point at which technical knowledge and political power overtly intersect, where the issues come out and have to be articulated in a public domain. She was concerned with the public meaning of science, a concern that was pretty consistent throughout her creative life.”

As well as books on nuclear power protests, she wrote or co-wrote volumes on creationism, animal rights, occupational health, and risk. She had a keen eye for under-researched issues, and produced a notable early study of intellectual property in science and an influential study of science and the media, *Selling Science: How the Press Covers Science and Technology* (1987). The latter typified Nelkin’s stance as a friendly critic of science—she insisted on the necessary tensions between science and journalism, but also proposed that the two needed to strive for better mutual understanding.

More recently, Nelkin focused on the life sciences, finding that it was developments in bioscience and biotechnology that most often created tensions between scientific advances and established social values. This work yielded three important books. *Dangerous Diagnostics: The Social Power of Biological Information* (1989, with Lawrence Tancredi) charted the rise of a culture of testing, including genetic testing, which located the source of problems in the individual, and downplayed social causes and solutions. *The DNA Mystique: The Gene as a Cultural Icon* (1995, with Susan Lindee) reviewed the many manifestations of “gene talk” in contemporary media, and suggested that molecular genetics went along with a new-found popularity for genetic determinism. *The Body Bazaar: The Market for Human Tissue in the Biotechnology Age* (2001, with Lori Andrews) examined the complexities arising from the commodification of human tissue.

After the first of these titles appeared, Nelkin moved from Cornell, where she helped to establish a still-flourishing science and technology studies programme, to New York University. There she held a full professorship in the sociology department and was an affiliated professor in the law school. Although nearing her 70s, she showed few signs of slowing down, and before she died her post had been extended until 2005.

As well as being a prolific writer—she wrote or was co-author of 26 books—Nelkin served on innumerable committees, panels, and editorial boards. She was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1984, won the J D Bernal Award of the Society for Social Studies of Science in 1988, and was elected a fellow of the US National Science Foundation’s Institute of Medicine in 1993. She was also an adviser to the US federal government’s Human Genome Project.

She had lately been working on a different aspect of DNA and culture: the influence of the double helix on the visual arts. A book, *The Molecular Gaze: Art in the Genetic Age* (with Suzanne Anker) will be published later this year. She had also begun to develop a project on science and religion to explore her view that “Like the physicists engaged in God-talk, geneticists and evolutionary psychologists are borrowing the compelling concepts of one belief system to meet the needs of another”.

Nelkin is survived by her husband of 50 years, the physicist Mark Nelkin, her daughter Lisa, and a granddaughter.

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