

# ICS Seminar Series

INSTITUTE FOR CULTURE AND SOCIETY

## Biology, Semiotics and Complexity: The Development of Mexican Notions of Person

**Dr Juan Carlos Zavala Olalde**

with Dr Gabriela Coronado (Chair) and  
Professor Bob Hodge (commentary)

Date

Thursday 23 October

Time

11.30am – 1pm

Venue

EB.2.21 Parramatta  
(South) Campus

### Abstract

This paper brings together concepts and perspectives from biology and cultural studies to explore strengths and limitations of the concept of 'person' in Mexican culture, discourse and practice. It argues that the dominant concept of 'person' misrepresents the social forces and intercultural contexts of socialisation and education in a nation strongly divided on class and ethnic lines. The paper focuses on this concept to inquire into the implications of the split of the biological from social and cultural dimensions. The paper brings out the importance of emphasising the biocultural dimension of personal and social life. It develops two concepts from biology, *Evo-devo* and *Epigenetics*, to explore some complexities of the Mexican situation. In this case it connects *Evo-devo* (an integration of theories of *evolution* and *ontogenesis*, the dynamic, species-shaping role of mechanisms of development of individual organisms and niches, connected to concepts of the emergence of social individuals) to Braudel's 'long history'. *Epigenetics* (the formative role of environments or 'epigenetic landscapes' in which genetic processes unfold), is considered as a model for interactions between biological and cultural inheritance and a series of formative contexts.

### Biography

Dr Juan Carlos Zavala Olalde is a Mexican Anthropologist with a Bachelors degree with Honours in Biology, Masters degree in Physical Anthropology and PhD in Linguistics from the Autonomous National University of Mexico, UNAM. His interdisciplinary career began researching molecular processes of organ development both as a thesis and by working on different projects at the National Polytechnic Institute, IPN. From his biological background, his interests in anthropology led him into the study of Palaeoanthropology, psychological processes of consciousness (at the School of Psychology at UNAM) and Linguistics (at the National School of Anthropology and History, ENAH). His PhD focused on Linguistic Anthropology with a biocultural approach. The PhD thesis brings together evolution, development and semantics in Mayan children's conceptual development.

He has been a lecturer in Evolution at the Faculty of Science at UNAM for 8 years, in Semantics and Semiotics at ENAH, and in Biocultural Processes at the State University of Valle of Toluca (for one year in both universities).

Currently he is undertaking postdoctoral research with Dr Coronado and Professor Hodge as an Adjunct fellow at the Institute for Culture and Society, University of Western Sydney. The research project focuses on a Biology, Semiotics and Complexity approach to the study of biocultural notions of the development of the person in multicultural Mexico.