Paul Rabinow chose the field of anthropology because he didn’t want to spend his life in the library. “The world is what interests me,” he says. And, whether studying rural religion in Morocco or biotechnology in Emeryville, reflecting on his experience in the world has been Rabinow’s primary concern. His recent interest in molecular biology took him to a local biotech company called Cetus, where the revolutionary technology of the polymerase chain reaction was developed in the 1980s. (Cetus scientist Kary Mullis, Ph.D. ’75, won a Nobel Prize in 1993 for PCR.) Rabinow’s account was published last year as Making PCR: A Story of Biotechnology. His next book, with the working title “French DNA,” chronicles his experience at a genome-mapping center in Paris, where he was asked to serve as a “philosophic observer.”

Such ventures indicate the range of Rabinow’s intellectual life. He has long been interested in French thought, in interpretive social science, and more recently in how science is done in the modern world.

Rabinow was born in 1944 and grew up in Queens, New York. He was, he says, a “beatnik kid.” And intellectually precocious. In junior high school he started his lifelong affair with things French when he became hooked on Sartre and Camus. He went to Stuyvesant High School, one of the top science and math schools in New York City. Although offered a scholarship to Columbia—where bright Jewish boys from New York might be expected to go—Rabinow instead chose to travel to the University of Chicago, where, he says, “the culture hero was Aristotle, not Mick Jagger.”

At Chicago he fell under the spell of philosophy professor Richard McKeon—“the great teacher of my life”—and thought
about a career in philosophy. "But I didn't want to spend my life arguing about distinctions at a philosophic level, as important as that is," Rabinow says today. "Anthropology seemed a way to do inquiry while still being philosophical at some level."

During his senior year at Chicago, Rabinow took the graduate-course sequence in anthropology; he then asked if he could take the Ph.D. exams. After a bit of head-scratching, the professors agreed to give him the written doctoral exam. He got the highest score in the department. When Rabinow decided to pursue graduate work in anthropology at Chicago, he was told of the school's policy against admitting undergraduate degree-holders to its graduate programs. "But I passed my exams already," said Rabinow. "You have to take me!" They did, with the proviso that he get away from Chicago by spending a year in France.

Rabinow went off to Paris in the fall of 1965, to the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, where he sat at the feet of anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss. Three years later he was in Morocco, doing field work under Clifford Geertz, one of America's leading anthropologists. Rabinow wrote about his experience in Symbolic Domination: Cultural Form and Historical Change in Morocco (1975) and the influential Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco (1977).

In 1978 Rabinow accepted a tenured position in the anthropology department here. Shortly after his arrival, he and Lynn Hunt, then in the history department, co-founded the Berkeley Program in French Studies, a shoestring operation that facilitates visits of scholars and intellectuals from France. Rabinow was a close friend of one of the greatest post-World War II French thinkers, the late Michel Foucault, who became a frequent visitor to the Berkeley campus. Rabinow and Berkeley philosophy professor Hubert Dreyfus together wrote Michel Foucault, Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics (1982). Rabinow edited The Foucault Reader in 1984 and is now general editor of the three-volume American edition of Foucault's interviews, lectures, and essays which will begin to appear this spring.

Rabinow accurately describes himself as a "floating inquirer" in his most recent book, Essays in the Anthropology of Reason, published at the end of 1996. He talked about his study of science, the future of the university, the practice of thinking, and other matters at his home in South Berkeley, where he lives with his wife and 8-year-old son.

Q: Why did you, an anthropologist, study molecular biology?
A: There were a number of reasons. I wanted to see what kinds of new understandings and new objects were being created and brought into the world by modern biotech firms. Also, I wanted to have a more detailed way of looking at some of their claims. When a colleague says, "There's a gene for curiosity," or one for gays, I can ask what chromosome it's on, what it looks like, what it does, and how come they haven't found it yet. Rather than simply responding: that must be true—or not true.

Q: You've said that learning about molecular biology was easier than reading French theorists like Jacques Derrida.
A: A lot easier. And probably more interesting too. But a lot of people in the humanities don't take that stance. They're intimidated by technical scientific work.

Q: Why weren't you?
A: First of all because I had something of a scientific background in my education. In a course called "Ideas and Methods of the Physical Sciences" at Chicago, Richard McKeon taught us to look at systems—whether of Newton or of Leibniz—and to see that while no system is ever adequate, by understanding systems from the inside, by understanding the complex interrelations of the parts, you can learn a great deal. And I think that's applicable to molecular biology.

Q: You write about the "two cultures"—science and the humanities—in your recent book of essays. How has their relation changed since C.P. Snow defined the gulf between them in 1959?
A: I'm struck by how little has changed, given the fact of how much the fields have changed. The biosciences have changed unbelievably since 1959. It's a completely different enterprise, on every possible level. And in many ways the humanities have changed radically since then, too, with deconstructionism, post-structuralism, post-modernism.

And yet the relation between the two—a sort of mutual blindness and antagonism, with both of them losing sight of common goals and values—is remarkably the same. The challenge is to put modernist culture and a belief in science together. It's surprising how few people even see that as an issue.

I think there are more people in the human sciences who respect science and want to understand it than the other way around. While there are many people in the sciences who like to go to concerts, listen to opera, and read novels, I don't think it influences what they do very much.

Q: Why not?
A: Well, it's private. It's a different sphere. It's "culture." It doesn't trouble them—not only in the sense of keeping them up at night worrying about the meaning of life, but in pondering the meaning of what they're doing.

Q: If scientists are cut off from reflecting about meaning, what about the humanists who take a gee-whiz attitude toward science and say: "The scientists are the ones who know the truth, and we can't?"
A: I think they're both silly positions. Norbert Weiner, who invented cybernetics—and was a genius—at one point decided to learn Chinese. So he learned Mandarin. And he said a sentence in Mandarin that no one had ever said before. And that sentence was: "I speak Chinese perfectly." Anyone who had learned Mandarin previously was imbued with traditional Chinese culture, in which no one who was a Mandarin could ever say such a thing.

I think a lot of scientists are like that. Any scientist who would say "We have the truth, and you don't" doesn't get it. The really good scientists understand how little they understand. Science at one level is surely about modesty.

Max Weber said in 1917 that one of the fundamental conditions of scientific work is that you must be absolutely dedicated to discovering things, knowing that everything you discover, by definition, will be out of date if it's worth anything, because more will come out of it. And I think that sort of attitude is missing among certain groups of scientists.

Q: And then there are non-scientists who scoff at the notion of science.
A: They're wrong, too, of course. If you live in a democracy and believe in some way in the importance of a critical understanding, then you have to study science, because the various sciences are an absolutely essential component of how we understand the world and what the truth is. If you leave that entirely to the scientists, you're abrogating your responsibility as a citizen.
So one of the motivations for my doing these various science projects is that I felt it incumbent upon me to learn something about one of the scientific fields. Many people in the humanities are not only intimidated by science but are dominated in many ways within a university setting by the power and money and importance of the professional schools and science departments. I think this is, finally, a curriculum issue—the technical sciences and the human sciences need to be brought more forcefully into relation in the curriculum.

Q: Let’s talk about the university. Where are we in higher education at the end of the 20th century?
A: We’re in a middle of a wave of retirements and rehirings now, a generational and demographic change: the people who came of age in the 1950s and then moved into the academy during its huge expansion are now retiring. There’s also the unrelated but extremely important fact of the end of the Cold War. You must remember that something like 80 percent of science funding since the Second World War has been military funding: and that’s shifting down. Physics is suffering from that; so is engineering.

We’re also in the midst of several extremely major and rapid changes—in particular, knowledge in molecular biology and in informatics. Therefore, the nature of our understanding of various key areas of life is rapidly shifting.

Q: Berkeley has been in the forefront of this change, hasn’t it?
A: Yes. Daniel Koshland raised $120 million 15 years ago to build two new biology buildings in Berkeley because he understood that if he could do that, he could eliminate all of the 19th-century disciplines in the life sciences. Which he did. And it’s become a model now for the 21st-century disciplines of integrative biology and evolutionary biology on the one hand, and molecular and cell biology on the other.

But no one is giving the humanities and social sciences $120 million to build buildings. So the 19th-century German disciplines, which are clearly outdated and should be eliminated, are going to linger on. But there’s a lot of turmoil because they don’t make sense any more internally. Furthermore, there’s a massive change in terms of gender politics, and in terms of the student body. One example: Berkeley now has 40 percent Asian students.

We’re in a very accelerated period of change.

Q: And at such times there come wars?
A: That’s right. The so-called “culture wars” and lately the “science wars” are clashes about how to interpret the past and about who’s going to control the future of education.

There are strategic moves going on to control what’s going to happen for the next 30 years. Over the next five years, 10,000 people will be hired as faculty across the country; and these people will control the next three decades. So this is not just a lot of whistling in the wind, even though the contents of many of the debates, these “wars,” is stupid. The stakes are very high. And how to control these matters is the issue.

Q: But some changes have already occurred?
A: Yes. The molecularization of biology has taken place; and, although the humanities are less settled, a broadening of the canon there has certainly taken place.

Q: What further changes would you like to see?
A: I think that the reinvention of the university, which is what is going on now, should have, must have, some open spaces for invention. If the university is to flourish, then the 19th-century disciplines—which is after all what the humanities and the social sciences are—have to be rethought. It would be nice to see more creative thought as to what the disciplines of the 21st century are going to be.

Q: You’re saying that the social science disciplines are at an end?
A: Well, I think the distinctions between sociology and anthropology and psychology and economics and political science and geography are more or less meaningless. They have strong institutional weight, and therefore many people are very invested in them. But if there isn’t more change, some of these disciplines will disappear, because they’ll be irrelevant.

I periodically teach a course with Allan Pred, who’s in the geography department. I think we basically do the same thing. Whereas there are colleagues in anthropology I never talk to intellectually.

What I’ve found in looking at biotechnology outside the university is that it’s very dynamic and active. My main criticism of the university is its tremendous inertia, its tremendous resistance to inventing anything. Much of the academy is consumed by people’s opinions of other people. There are qualities I would like to see more of which I don’t find in the academy very much.

Q: For instance?
A: More flexibility; more interest in the real world; more cooperation. Tom White, who was my chief informant on the PCR book, couldn’t understand why the University didn’t help me to do my research. He was a scientific manager, and his whole job was to help people get their work done and do new things. He couldn’t understand that people at the University—the deans, my colleagues—always said no; that anything I felt I was doing at Berkeley I was doing on my own—against the obstacles of the University, not with its help.

There are lots of wonderful people at Berkeley. And the students here are fabulous. But a sense of support for curiosity, of support for people who are doing things, is missing.

Q: Berkeley is at a crossroads, with a new chancellor to be named this spring. What do you think is needed here in the years ahead?
A: This is a very acute period. There’s clearly no intellectual plan or leadership or coherence about where this place is going. And, with the entry of Pete Wilson and his friends into educational matters, this is very important. During the past 15 years, I think Chancellors Heyman and Tien could survive on a lot of inertia and good will, raising money and supporting the sciences and the business school. But I think we need leadership now.

With the end of the Soviet empire and with all the changes in sciences and information technology and with the globalization of capitalism, we’re in a moment that has never hap-

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pened before. The 21st-century university has to deal with this: we have to be global, we have to be scientific, and we have to be interpretive, all at the same time.

The pedagogic task—which I see no signs of being implemented at Berkeley—is to think of how you would teach people to live in that world and make sense of it, and to shape it in a way that’s better rather than worse. It would be nice to be in a university in which there was thinking going on about how our children will cope with the next century.

Q: And that’s not happening?
A: That is absolutely not happening in any integrated way. Of course people are thinking about what kind of computers they should have and how big the business school should be. But there hasn’t been a single discussion at this campus about what the curriculum is going to look like in the future.

Q: Do you have any ideas?
A: I have plenty of ideas! I don’t think it’s even that complicated. I think you have to go back to some big form of general education, on a global level. Where you have to learn world history, science, economics, languages. Everybody who is claiming to be a member of a world citizenry has to have a modicum of these knowledges if we have any hope of a democratic future.

Q: Aren’t we learning different and new sciences at Berkeley today?
A: Not in any integrated kind of way. Of course, biochemists learn contemporary biochemistry. But they’re not required to learn German or Chinese, and they’re certainly not required to learn anything about hermeneutics. And they should be.

Q: Given what you’ve been saying, what’s your position on tenure?
A: Clearly the downside of tenure is that a lot of people can not do very much but also be extremely irresponsible in their criticism of others. With no sanctions. There’s no reality principle for lots of people in the academy after a certain point.

Q: After tenure?
A: After tenure. But statistics, now old but apparently more or less true today, are that something like 80 percent of people [in the academy] never publish any book ever in their career. Ten percent publish one book, their thesis. That is to say, something like 90 percent of people in the academy never do a second piece of research that they publish on. Five percent publish two books. And the people who publish more than two books, something like 3 percent, publish all the rest. So 97 percent of those who have tenure are on all the committees and become deans and all the rest.

Q: What would the solution be?
A: Abolishing tenure is not the answer. We’ve had the experience of McCarthy and Reagan and others. But I would be in favor of something like ten-year contracts: everybody periodically would have to be reviewed. That would mean there would be somewhat more of a principle of responsibility.

Q: Would you talk about “the practice of thinking,” which you discuss in your recent collection of essays?
A: There are three important contexts for thinking as a practice. One is the city. A second could be the university—it has been in various times and places. And a third, which goes back to the Greeks but is in many ways present again, is friendship.

By this I mean that one thinks with a very small group of people with whom one has formed relationships of trust. Such friends are very, very valuable. This more intimate locus of friendship for thinking has become important to me, because it’s not the profession or the discipline or the university or marriage as the primary locus of where one does one’s thinking, exploring, testing.

I’ve been fortunate enough to have close friends in my life. And then, increasingly, over time, I’ve tried to make this into something I value. Friendship exists, even though not many people think about it. It’s a small crusade of mine to put a little bit back on the agenda. One of my close friends is a former student. And that’s one of the most important things I’ve gotten out of Berkeley.

Q: What’s been most important to you in your intellectual career?
A: I could name a few people—Richard McKeon, Michel Foucault, and others—and a few places, like New York, Paris, and Chicago. But I think what’s been important to me is a kind of practice of understanding that is related to experience. I think there’s a sense of putting oneself into the activity, and not knowing in advance what’s going to happen. To approach thought as a thing of the world. That thought is something you do. This includes sitting in your study, teaching, and discussion, but it also includes seeking out settings in which you risk learning something. Which means: you risk changing.

Now most people don’t want to do that. Most people don’t actually want to learn anything. And most people don’t actually want to change.

But I think this is what philosophy is. And I think at some level this is what science is.

Q: What?
A: The fact that you don’t know in advance what you’re going to find. That you are modest in an arrogant sort of way in the face of the fact that you are trying to understand important things. And that it’s worth doing. I’m increasingly willing to assert that understanding and inquiry are worthwhile per se, whether or not they lead to products.

Q: A final question: what gives coherence or form to your own intellectual life?
A: It links up in some ways to the question: What is a philosophic life? That’s the kind of question which is either banal or surprisingly hard to answer. I’d say that a philosophic life is one in which you’re reflective about what you’re doing. Both sides of that statement are important: you’re doing something so that you have experience; and you also reflect on that experience.

I guess the question is: How to keep learning? How to keep an active curiosity? Because the world changes. We live in very, very complicated and mixed but exciting times. What’s important to me is to try and be somehow related to what’s going on out there.