

Making DNA and its becoming an experimental commodity

How has DNA been made, how was it made into an experimental commodity, and why does this all matter? We could begin, perhaps a little conservatively, by appreciating that how DNA is made in organisms became one of the most central research questions in modern biology once the significance of these molecules for development and reproduction was recognised. Beyond this, it is also true that today virtually everything that goes on in a biological science laboratory depends on the ability to acquire precisely defined lengths of DNA, and annual sales of synthesised DNA run into the hundreds of millions of dollars. For decades deoxyribonucleic acid has been both a target of investigation and a laboratory tool. But as yet we have no history of biology that explains the origins and development of DNA synthesis. Building on oral history interviews, histories written by scientific actors, and reviews of the literature, my paper explains how people learnt to make DNA outside the organism, why this matters, and how DNA became a successful experimental commodity.

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