

NEUROCULTURES

A workshop at the Max-Planck Institute for the History of Science

Organized by Max Planck Institute for the History of Science (MPIWG)
 BIOS Centre, London School of Economics

Anticipated date: 20-21 February 2009

Location: MPIWG, Berlin

Particularly since the “Decade of the Brain,” various neuro fields have emerged. Neurotheology, neuroesthetics, neuropsychanalysis, neuroeducation, neuroeconomics, social neuroscience, and others wish to reform the human sciences on the basis of knowledge about the brain. Driven by the availability of brain imaging technologies, particularly PET and fMRI, these fields tend to focus on the quest for “neural correlates” of the behaviors and mental processes in question. Their emergence indicates the increasing importance of the brain as the bodily organ with which humans have come to identify. Originally employed to examine sensory and motor functions, PET and fMRI studies since the early 1990s have increasingly dealt with topics of potential ethical, legal, social and policy implications, such as attitudes, cooperation and competition, violence, or religious experience. Commercial enterprises like neuromarketing (whose aim is to shape advertising campaigns on the basis of what scans may reveal about potential customers’ preferences and choice mechanisms) or neurobics (which provides exercises to reach right brain awareness, contact your creative other self, or make your brain feel younger) have developed concomitantly. The term neurolaw designates a legal specialty devoted to the representation of cases involving injuries of the central nervous system or, in a different understanding, it explores the effects of neuroscientific discoveries on legal standards and the theory and practice of law. While neurophilosophy prepared the intellectual ground for these developments since the 1980s, it has recently been complemented by neuroethics, which seeks to understand and anticipate the ethical, social, and legal consequences of neuroscientific knowledge and its applications. As some of the other neuro areas mentioned above, but with extraordinary speed and public and private support, neuroethics has become an institutionalized professional field complete with departments, chairs, institutes, and journals. The media, both popular and specialized, has given much room to these emergent fields. It has also reported on new forms of sociability and identity politics incarnate in the emerging “neurodiversity” movement and various sorts of “neurocommunities.” These developments show that neuroscientific knowledge is spreading rapidly beyond the confines of brain research proper into different areas of life and our culture as a whole.

The workshop proposes to think of such constellations of ideas, practices, and social forms as “neurocultures.” Most recently, the term “neurosocieties” has been used as title of a meeting on “the rise and impact of the new brain sciences” organized to launch the European Neuroscience and Society Network at the BIOS Centre of the London School of Economics, while in April

2007 the online magazine *Slate* devoted a series of articles to “mind science and the state of neuro-culture,” especially to “how laboratory research on the brain makes its way into our daily lives.” Without wishing to make fundamental distinctions and fully aware of the polysemic nature of both “culture” and “society,” we prefer the term neurocultures (in the plural) in order to emphasize the construction of different norms, values, meanings, and identities through neuro discourses and practices. The term also designates the cultivation of new forms of being and the formation of institutions and groups, some of which could be depicted as subcultures within the societies considered. Speaking of neurocultures will also help to keep us centered on the contexts and history of the emerging neuro disciplines and related practices (such as neurobics), which will be the empirical focus of the workshop. The workshop will pursue such questions as:

- How has neuroscientific knowledge penetrated and fashioned neurocultures? Reciprocally, how have the neurosciences been affected by the latter?
- How substantial are the changes introduced by neuro methods and perspectives into areas traditionally covered by the human sciences?
- Have these areas as well as our conduct of life and views about the human undergone those major transfigurations announced by many neuro specialists?
- Is there a common denominator to the emerging neuro disciplines? Is it merely ideological or have the practices of these fields been transformed as well?
- What purpose does their alignment with the neurosciences serve (access to funding, image of scientificity, naturalization to protect claims against cultural relativism)?

The workshop will take place at Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Berlin, on two subsequent days providing enough time for 10-12 presentations. If possible, papers will be precirculated, and, at least in some cases, we plan to bring together an author who deals with a neuro area as object of cultural analysis and an interlocutor actively engaged in the area in question.

Contact: Nicolas Langlitz (nlanglitz@mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de)
 Fernando Vidal (vidal@mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de)