

International Center for the History of Knowledge in Berlin

The cooperation between the Berlin Universities and the MPIWG has led to a formal cooperation agreement between the Max Planck Society, the Free University and the Humboldt University; a comparable cooperation agreement with the Technical University is in preparation. As one of its first tasks, the scientific board of this project has outlined the following main goals and structural features of an International Center for the History of Knowledge in Berlin in the near future.

With its three universities, the Free University, the Humboldt University and the Technical University, as well as the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, the city of Berlin harbors great potential for setting up an interuniversity internationally oriented center. This is the purpose of the cooperation agreement signed last year by the MPG, the FU and the HU in Berlin. For its part, the MPIWG is planning to establish two independent groups of junior scholars; the Humboldt University will add a tenure-track assistant professorship to its existing chair for the history of science; and the Free University is planning to set up a chair for the History of Science. In short, the history of science field will undergo significant staff expansion in Berlin. A comparable cooperation agreement is being pursued with the TU Berlin, which has begun setting up a field emphasizing research on cognition and knowledge; we hope to realize this agreement in 2008.

At present the humanities, and especially the smaller disciplines, are facing the challenge of repositioning themselves in a dynamic science landscape undergoing great change. The intersection between the subjects of the humanities and those of

the natural and human sciences plays a particularly important role in this process. A prominent role pertains to the history of science, which is particularly suited to the role of serving as an interface between disciplines. In a sense, its core conception is interdisciplinary: thematically oriented toward understanding the development of the sciences, and especially - but not only - of the natural sciences, at the same time its methodology is anchored firmly in the historical sciences.

According to the results of a first discussion in the Advisory Board, the tasks of an International Center for the History of Knowledge can be described as follows.

I. Research

1) From the perspective of a historical epistemology, the history of science first of all can offer opportunities for reflection that allow interdisciplinary dialog to be directed toward a comprehensive cultural history of knowledge, rather than restricting it to purely pragmatic collaborations. If our current and future societies increasingly understand themselves to be knowledge societies, their conception of themselves must be able to draw on a comprehensive cultural history of knowledge, and this history must undergo constant further development. Working to advance this development should be one of the core tasks of the center.

2) We see a further core task of an International Center for the History of Knowledge in the intensive cultivation and promotion of relations between the natural sciences on the one hand, and the humanities and social sciences on the other. Today such a dialog is demanded everywhere, but imperative for it to be conducted effectively are institutional structures that are not

only stable, but also flexible. The center is to serve as a forum for this dialog, taking on the task of trying out new forms of confrontation between the various cultures of knowledge and conducting them with the commensurate perseverance.

3) A third task of the Center for the History of Knowledge in Berlin consists in networking the various historically oriented humanities and social sciences as broadly and effectively as possible. Even now, the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science offers work opportunities to scientists who concern themselves with the history of knowledge from a wide variety of backgrounds: art history and the history of literature, music history and even the history of architecture and technology. All of these areas have myriad connections with the historical development of knowledge and the sciences and, accordingly, their research efforts should also refer to each other and to such a history of knowledge.

II. Teaching

4) Fourth, a Center for the History of Knowledge in Berlin could be a place to coordinate teaching, above all research-oriented teaching. For this the MPIWG would like to respond to the needs of the university partners by focusing the as yet scattered teaching activities of its staff. The teaching at issue here takes place not only in the humanities, but also in the natural sciences. MPIWG staff already offer a course (lecture and seminar) as part of the new Master's program for Biology at the FU Berlin. Yet another objective is to make Berlin an attractive location for foreign doctoral students in the history of science. This could pick up on graduate programs and schools that already exist or are being established now, but could also be expanded in

the future by setting up an International Max Planck Research School, as part of the envisioned cooperation with the TU Berlin.

III. Expanding Cooperation Projects

At the current stage, the Scientific Advisory Board anchored in the cooperation agreement among the FU, HU and MPG appears to be a body well suited to organizing the center. Thanks to the participation of regular guests, further important cooperation partners are already represented such as the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, the Center for Human and Health Sciences of the Charité Hospital, and the new Institute of integrated Life Sciences at the Humboldt University which is in the process of being set up.

IV. Infrastructure

5) The Center for the History of Knowledge is to feature an international guest program, which will include not only established academics, but also doctoral and post-doctoral scholars. This could make an ideal contribution to expanding the history of science research activities of the participating institutions, and to networking them, in particular with the international community of science historians. A guest program of this kind should also be accompanied by an attractive program of events at the center, tailored for the students of all three universities.

6) Finally, the International Center for the History of Knowledge will be able to fulfill its tasks, and just as important, to establish an internationally visible profile and identity, only with a coordinating office and premises of its own. This goal

already seems realistic thanks to Berlin's current endeavors to encourage collaboration between the universities and non-university research institutions. The question as to where these premises should be set up is a matter for further discussion.