

Press Release

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An Independent Research Group at the Max Planck Institute for the
History of Science is Investigating the History of Human
Diversity in the Twentieth Century

Entitled “Historicizing Knowledge about Human Biological Diversity in the 20th Century,” an international research group at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science began its work on September 1, 2009. This project’s aim is to investigate the production of knowledge about biological and anthropological human diversity during the past century. The group will complete its studies during the next five years. Part of a larger collaboration between the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science and the three main universities in Berlin to explore the history of knowledge, this interdisciplinary research group will complete its studies during the next five years.

Three historians of knowledge – Veronika Lipphardt, Alexandra Widmer, and Susanne Bauer – are examining the diversity discourses and practices of life science research that twentieth-century bioscientists employed to research, represent, and visualize human diversity. They are placing twentieth-century investigations in the larger context of various epistemological, political, and social development frameworks. These projects explore the human genetic paradigm shift between the terms “race” and “population,” the micropolitics of difference in biomedicine as practiced in the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation, and knowledge about heredity, reproduction, and diversity in the South Pacific island nation of Vanuatu. The research group’s work is interdisciplinary. Having previously carried out research at the Humboldt University in Berlin, the University of Copenhagen, and York University in Toronto, the members of the research group are now continuing their studies at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin.

These historians of science are investigating together the complex history of scholarship on biological diversity during the twentieth century. Starting in the early modern period, from the “abundance of variation” among human characteristics scholars have attempted to draw underlying inferences concerning a “natural order” of humanity. With the emergence of special biological disciplines such as physical anthropology, evolutionary biology, genetics, and eugenics, the production of knowledge about “race” in the early-twentieth century was intimately connected to the development of knowledge about reproduction, heredity, population, and health. “Race” remained a central category in these studies until the mid-twentieth century, with life scientists and anthropologists using the concept to postulate and raise biological difference to an object of research. After 1945, life science researchers deployed concepts such as “population,” “descent,” or biological and geographical “origins” in order to avoid using the discredited concept of “race.” The idea that certain groups are biologically distinguishable, however, was maintained in more historically recent research approaches. At the end of the twentieth century, new research fields emerged under the influence of molecular biology. Together with pharmacogenomics, forensics, and genealogy, these areas of knowledge promoted a revitalization of the genetic “race” concept.

The Max Planck Institute for the History of Science’s website currently features a background piece on the new research group’s labors: www.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de

For more information: Dr. Veronika Lipphardt, vlipphardt@mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de

Our website: www.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de

For press inquiries: Dr. Hansjakob Ziemer, hjziemer@mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de