

Neuro-Reality Check. Scrutinizing the 'neuro-turn' in the humanities and natural sciences.

A Workshop at the Max-Planck-Institute for the History of Science, Berlin. December, 1-3 December 2011
organized by Suparna Choudhury and Max Stadler

Call for Papers

The deadline for abstract submission is 15 February 2011

Today, few developments in the world of science and technology would seem to draw comparable degrees of attention, commentary and sheer excitement than the neurosciences. Within and beyond academia it has become routine to celebrate or alternatively, to castigate, the purportedly palpable effects and consequences – social, political, cultural and intellectual - of the recent expansions of the neurosciences. Whether we witness art historians finding fault with neuro-enthusiastic colleagues, linguists warning of a 'new biologism', ethicists, science policy strategists and anthropologists pondering the future impacts of neuroscience, literary critics and artists dabbling in mirror-neurons, or media-savvy neuroscientists forming a new kind of public intellectual, the neurosciences have, without question, inspired a great deal of scholarly and not-so-scholarly action. Indeed, so familiar have these discourses become, so seemingly self-evident their significance, that the problematisations of the neurosciences rarely appear to move beyond elaborations of the already familiar or, at best, partisan polemics.

More problematic, on closer inspection the majority of these diverse neuro-discourses would seem to operate on a very thin evidential basis. Claims being made about neuroscience's societal impacts more often than not possess the same kind of impressionistic qualities as the growing alarmism on the part of Geisteswissenschaftler lamenting the neuro-induced loss of cultural capital and contracting research budgets. The conspicuous absence of a solid evidential basis in these matters is the working hypothesis of the planned workshop: Neuro-Reality Check.

Our ambition is to take problematisations of the neurosciences to another level. While numerous new scholarly projects in the social sciences and humanities have recently emerged to analyze the growth of 'neuromania', our workshop aims to bring together scholars from a diversity of disciplinary backgrounds in order to step back a little, and to probe deeper into the alleged effects and actual causes of the ongoing neurohype. This will include exploring the extent to which discourses engendering neuroscience in fact do match neuroscience's real world (social) effects; but it will also include interrogating the anatomy of the neuro-discourses themselves, and to locate the immense attractions and functions of the 'neuro' in the broader scheme of - intellectual and political - things: the promise and attractions of 'interdisciplinarity' within contemporary humanities; the surge of underlabouring specialities such as neuroethics; or the rise and growing acceptance, within recent years, of a new (neuro) 'biologism' in a great many academic disciplines and popular culture at large, as well as the opposition this engenders. Our aim, in other words, is to encourage a more de-centred kind of analysis than the one

typically pursued: Why, for instance, is it that art historians or political theorists choose to eschew 'theory' in favour of neuroscientific wisdom? Which ideological sea-changes reside behind the frequently proclaimed 'crisis' in the humanities, and how do they resonate with the turn to the 'neuro'? What are the interests and economic conditions driving the mushrooming of interdisciplinary neuro-X academic subfields in the contemporary academic landscape? Or again, is it really – empirically - the case that we are on the verge on of a 'neuro-revolution', our life-worlds, language and habits already being subtly transformed?

The general aim of the workshop, then, is to gather together scholars working on, and thinking about the sprawling discourses surrounding the neurosciences today, to arrive at a clearer understanding of just why it is that within and beyond academia 'neuroscience' generates the excitement and fears that it unquestionably does. Through this workshop, we aim to improve on the latter as well as to invite scholars to reflect upon these – both embracing and hostile - responses. All submitted abstracts showing some relation to our main theme will be given careful consideration. In case of successful submission, we will be able to cover travel costs (economy class) and accommodation in Berlin. Abstracts of up to 300 words should include your name, institutional affiliation, and email address. These should be submitted by email to Suparna Choudhury (schoudhury@mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de) and Max Stadler (mstadler@mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de). The deadline for abstract submission is 15 February 2011.