The decades between 1880 and 1914 were decisive in the formation of psychiatry as an academic discipline in Germany: around 1880, the field represented an important factor of public order in the service of state authorities, and at the same time a sphere of institutionalised reflection on the dangers to the bourgeois self. However, only very few university departments of psychiatry existed, and within the curriculum of medical schools the subject became obligatory only in 1906. Compared to most disciplines of somatic medicine, psychiatry could not draw on the 'cultural capital' ascribed and the financial resources allocated to the new laboratory sciences, such as physiology and bacteriology. Most of the representatives of psychiatry lamented about the missing consensus on terminologies, classification, and therapeutic procedures for the postulated mental disorders. In contrast, for the period around 1910, a theoretical and institutional consolidation may be diagnosed. This consolidation was associated with a strong orientation towards the natural sciences and somatic medicine, and also with plausible answers to concerns of the public on the strains and health hazards of life in 'modern', industrialised society. The subspecialty of neurology, which during this time also emerged in particular from internal medicine, was for the time being integrated into psychiatry.¹

Within these three decades, the concept of neurasthenia as formulated by Beard (1869 and 1880) experienced a rapid career which is closely related to the developments in psychiatry. Furthermore, it is indicative of the public demand for professional interpretation of individual discomforts and social concerns. In this perspective, the discussions on the concept of neurasthenia are inseparable from the broader debates on the relationship between life in 'modern' civilisation, and health.
The following chapter will reconstruct this story, subdividing it into three stages. First, the intellectual and institutional resources for this career as present in the last decades of the 19th century will be sketched. The second part describes the early use of the neurasthenia-concept up to the early-1890s when the debate focused on frequent individual pathology strongly associated with the electrophysiology of the nervous system. During the third stage, the concept of neurasthenia converged with notions of heredity and degeneration, suggesting the collective pathology of the nation.

Intellectual and institutional resources

An ensemble of intellectual and institutional factors constituted the disposition that contributed to the rapid reception of the concept of neurasthenia in Germany.

Amongst the intellectual resources, three elements appear to be of particular relevance: the 'electrification' of the nervous system during the preceding decades of the 19th century; the combination of this perspective with the idea of limited energy reservoirs of an individual's body; and the availability of the category of 'neuropathic disposition' applicable to states of discomfort situated between health and disease.

Between circa 1830 and 1880, the work of physiologists and clinicians such as Hermann Helmholtz, Emil Du Bois-Reymond, Guillaume Duchenne, and finally the brain stimulation experiments by Eduard Hitzig and Gustav Fritsch, established a consensus about the importance of electricity for the functioning of the nervous system. Alongside with this, for the public, the manifold uses of electricity in the newly industrialised and urbanised world suggested the importance of this medium of energy for all kinds of processes associated with 'modern' life. Thus, during the last decades of the 19th century, it seemed very plausible and in accordance with the results of the most advanced sciences to understand the nervous system as a set of interrelated pipes and fibres activated by electrical impulses and energetic streams floating from the centre (brain) to the periphery (nerves and organs), and back.\(^2\)

Similarly, the concept of the conservation of energy in a closed system had been legitimised by results of physics and physiology, and had a considerable plausibility through experiences in everyday life. The formulations of the two laws of thermodynamics around 1850 by Helmholtz, Julius Robert Mayer, and Rudolf Clausius found a prominent public reception in particular from the 1880s onwards when the initial hopes in the unlimited potentials of industrialisation...