Different Histories from 20th Century Neuroscience

Introduction

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History and neuroscience make strange bedfellows.¹

During the last thirty years, interest in the brain has grown to become one of the most important issues within Western scientific enterprise. Immediately at the end of the “Decade of the Brain” (1990–2000), the dawn of a “new century” dedicated to this crucial organ was proclaimed.² Since the beginning of the present decade, brain research has conquered even more attention by entering in its “big science” phase – as shown by the launch of the United States’ BRAIN Initiative and the European Union’s Human Brain Project. A recent study on the predictability and sustainability of knowledge production in biological studies, based on the trends in the literature during the period 1991–2010, reported that if publications on the central nervous system keep growing at the same

rate from 2050 onwards, brain research would be producing more articles and essays than those published during the history of biology as a whole. The nervous system has become a scientific topic in a variety of disciplines – notwithstanding the attempt to integrate it into a unified scientific landscape, at least since the early adoption of the word “neuroscience” in the 1960s. The centrality of the brain is today a prominent feature of contemporary science and culture: we actually live in a “brain world” which neuroscience has been able to shape and which a whole range of media have helped to boost.

Indeed, what neuroscience has offered to Western culture over the last two decades is a complex intertwining of scientific facts, technological developments, cultural motifs and epistemological theories, which is gaining growing importance in every aspect of our everyday lives. The 21st-century idea of the brain, as conceptualized and explained by contemporary neuroscience, is literally invading and renewing our culture, policies and philosophy. Because of its heuristic power in offering knowledge about what we are and the world we live in, neuroscience is impacting more and more on our system of beliefs and values (as in the “neuro-turned” humanities and the increasing importance of neuroethical questions). At the same time, neuroscience is driving social research and bolstering technological development, inspiring engineers and economists alike. As Nikolas Rose put it ten years ago, we have now become “neurochemical selves” and our “brainhood” seems to be the main feature of contemporary “neuroculture.” Furthermore, in promising to change our history, neuroscience also impacts on our idea of history itself:

Unlike in times past, when history was held to be a crucial means to understanding who and what we are (individually and collectively), today we are encouraged to look no further than to our neurobiology. Because biology is held to be useful and economically efficient, it becomes more

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