

5th International Workshop on the History of Human Genetics

The Biological Future of Man: Continuities and Breaks in the History of Human Genetics, Before and After 1945.

June 21-23, 2012

Invitation

In June 2010, the last international workshop on genetics, history, and medicine, “The Early History of Human Molecular Genetics” took place in Gothenburg, Sweden. This workshop brought together geneticists, historians, and archivists to examine key developments in human molecular genetics. The Fifth International Workshop on the History of Human Genetics will take place as a satellite symposium of the 2012 meeting of the European Society of Human Genetics in Nuremberg.

‘Nuernberg’ (Nuremberg) has a long and interesting history. The town was founded in the Middle Ages and held the first ‘Reichstag’ of the Holy Roman Empire. It was also home to a number of famous artists, including Albrecht Durer. (See: www.nuernberg.de, available in English). During the Third Reich, Nuremberg gained prominence as the location of the ‘Reichsparteitage’ (the Nuremberg Rallies of the Nazi party) and the place where the Nuremberg Laws were enacted in 1935. The workshop will begin with a visit to the Documentation Centre which illustrates not only the history of the Third Reich but also the Nuremberg Trials which took place in 1945-6. A visit to the site of the Nuremberg Trials is being arranged for those who are interested. Other options will be available on request. It will be a great pleasure to welcome you to Nuremberg to discuss the history of human genetics in the 20th century!



Heike Petermann (Organisation)

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Preliminary Program:

June 21, 2012 (Thursday):

6 to 9 p.m.: Visit to the Documentation Centre: The problematic role of genetics in the history of the Third Reich up to Nuremberg Trials.

June 22, 2012 (Friday):

9 a.m. to 6 p.m.: Workshop
7:30 p.m.: Dinner in the city of Nuremberg

June 23, 2012 (Saturday):

9 a.m. to 3 p.m.: Workshop

Abstracts

Please see the Call for Abstracts for information about the goals and themes of the workshop. The maximum length of abstracts is 250 words. Abstracts must be received by February 17, 2012.

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Human Genetics is a science with two sides: on one side concepts of human genetics have often influenced social and political events, on the other side the development of human genetics has been influenced by various political forces.

At the end of the 19th century, heredity was dominated by Mendel's gene concept and Galton's biometrical approach (according to A. Motulsky). These were followed by early achievements in human genetics like the identification of chromosomes as the carriers of genetic information (1888), the discovery of the ABO blood group system (Landsteiner 1900) and the inheritance of blood types (von Dungern and Hirschfeld 1911), and the fundamental theorem of population genetics (Hardy-Weinberg-Law 1908).

At the beginning of the 20th century, the eugenics movements in many countries (e.g. Germany, Great Britain and the USA) became stronger. Many scientists believed that genes strongly influenced biology. They were convinced that the human species should either encourage the breeding of those with desirable traits (positive eugenics) or discourage the breeding of the sick and 'mentally defective' (negative eugenics). These eugenic concepts led to the sterilization of 'unfit' persons in many countries. During the Third Reich, these efforts at 'Rassenhygiene' became part of Nazi philosophy. In Germany, the Second World War formed a break in the history of heredity and human genetics. This was not the case in Anglo-American countries.

Important landmarks in Human Genetics after 1945 include the discovery of DNA (1953 Watson and Crick) and biochemical methods for detecting molecular diseases (1949 Pauling, sickle cell anemia). This period saw great progress in DNA technology, genetic epidemiology, cytogenetics, somatic cell genetics, and prenatal diagnosis.

Goals

The Second World War and its consequences greatly influenced the development of human genetics. However, continuities and discontinuities, breaks and changes varied with national settings. This workshop aims to evaluate the state of research and discuss the history of human genetics from a comparative perspective.

Themes

The workshop will be organized around the following three themes:

- Eugenic ideas and human genetics before 1945: Concepts of heredity and research on genetic diseases
- Changing approaches after 1945: From molecular biology to molecular genetics.
- The shadow of eugenics on today's human genetics: Scientific, social, ethical, legal and political aspects