

6-7 June 2011

Conveners: Edmund Russell (RCC/ University of Virginia), Angelika Möller (RCC),

Sponsor: Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society

Participants: Chris Smith (Aston University, UK), Peter Becker (University of Vienna, Austria), Olivia Smith (University of Oxford, UK), David Matuskey (Yale University, USA), Benedikt Berninger (LMU Munich, Germany), Kirsten Brukamp (RWTH Aachen, Germany), Daniel Smail (Harvard University, USA), Alejandro Gómez (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle - Paris III, France), Evgeny Gutyrchik (LMU Munich, Germany), Jörg Wettlaufer (CAU Kiel, Germany), Frank Zelko (University of Vermont, USA), Karin Meissner (LMU Munich, Germany), Carlos Collado Seidel (LMU Munich, Germany), Steve Fuller (University of Warwick, UK)

The world's first conference on neurohistory was held at the Rachel Carson Center on 6-7 June 2011. **EDMUND RUSSELL** and **ANGELIKA MÖLLER** were co-conveners. The program featured fourteen participants from eight countries and four continents. Presenters came from a variety of backgrounds, including history, philosophy, medicine, literature, and psychology.

DANIEL SMAIL (Harvard University) coined the term “neurohistory” in his 2008 book *Deep History and the Brain*. Neurohistory is a nascent field that synthesizes the insights of neuroscience with those of history to deepen our understanding of the past. Many of the participants said they had not thought about neurohistory as a field, but were intrigued enough, when they saw the call for papers, to submit proposals. The number of proposals exceeded the slots available, suggesting that the workshop was well timed to help neurohistory cohere as a field.

The conference focused on answering four questions:

- What ideas and methods have neuroscientists developed that historians can use to shed a new light on the past (and vice versa)?
- What new research questions can neuroscience suggest for historians (and vice versa)?
- What are the biggest challenges in developing neurohistory as a field, and how can

they be overcome?

- How might neurohistory shed light on the interaction between people and their environment, in both the past and the present?

The papers in the conference ranged widely across topics, space, and time. Daniel Smail opened the conference with a paper on the relationship between brain functioning and patterns of power in history. Other papers covered topics such as the placebo effect, how reward pathways of the brain shape behavior, the brain as an organizing idea for education in the twenty-first century, and the way brains process realistic and surrealistic art. The conference concluded with discussions in small groups designed to identify the opportunities and pitfalls that neurohistory might face as it develops as a field.

One of the pleasures of the conference was the open, supportive atmosphere. The range of fields represented was a strength as participants learned about the many ways in which scholars have thought about the role of brains in society. Participants disagreed on some things, which is a good thing in any scholarly gathering. Overall, participants reported that they enjoyed the workshop and found it valuable. Ed Russell will edit papers from the workshop for an issue of *Rachel Carson Perspectives*.

— Ed Russell