

WS Medical Humanities II, Bern, 26.03.2013

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AUTOIMMUNITIES – An International Exploratory Workshop

Main organisers

Vicky Kirby, Professor of Sociology and Anthropology, and Michelle Jamieson, Postdoc, School of Social Sciences and International Studies, University of New South Wales, Australia;

Manuela Rossini, Programme Coordinator, Institute of Advanced Study, University of Bern, Switzerland;

Stefan Herbrechter, Reader in Cultural Theory, Coventry University, UK;

Ivan Callus, Professor of English, University of Malta, Malta;

Partners

Marcel Tanner, Director, Elisabeth Zemp, Senior Investigator and Group Leader, and Jakob Zinsstag, Deputy Head of Department, Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute (Swiss TPH), University of Basel

Franziska Gygax, Professor of AmLit, SNF project Life (Beyond) Writing: Illness Narratives, English Department, University of Basel

Description

Conventionally studied in the field of immunology, autoimmunity refers to the immunologic phenomenon whereby an organism or body mounts an immune response against its own tissues. Originally described by Paul Ehrlich as *horror autotoxicus* – literally, the horror of self-toxicity – the term autoimmunity is today used to account for any instance in which the body fails to recognise its own constituents as ‘self’, an error that results in self-harm or injury. Put simply, autoimmunity, names the paradoxical situation in which self-defense (immunity, protection) manifests as self-harm (pathology).

The very possibility of autoimmunity poses a problem for the notion of immunity and the concept of identity that underpins it: namely, a given entity whose integrity is ensured by an innate ability to discriminate between self and other, benign and toxic. If self-protection can just as readily take the form of self-destruction, then it seems that the very identity of the self, and thus the boundary between self and other, is in question. In what sense can we speak of a ‘self’ whose nature is expressed as equally through acts of misrecognition and self-harm as those of self-defense? How are we to understand identity if it is guaranteed not by the assumed qualities of boundedness, autonomy and self-possession, but rather by the absence of a stable adjudicating referent?

Construed broadly, autoimmunity challenges us to think critically about the nature of any sovereign entity or identity, be they human or nonhuman, cells, nations or other forms of community. Its resonance with issues of identity, alterity and boundary maintenance has meant that the discourse of autoimmunity has found purchase in a diverse range of disciplines outside the biomedical sciences, including the medical humanities, philosophy, literary criticism, critical science studies and public health. Autoimmunity, and the related ideas of allergy, immunity, community and tolerance have been used to critically examine issues ranging from political violence and sovereign power, globalisation, demographic change and migration, to disease epidemics and discourses of quarantine and contamination, to name just a few. At issue in these engagements is a concern with the difficulty of clearly demarcating what is foreign from what belongs – the essential foreignness of the self to itself, which emerges as identity’s founding condition.

Aims

- To provide a forum for a genuinely interdisciplinary discussion of autoimmunity, in which diverse understandings and perspectives on this concept from the humanities, social sciences and biomedical sciences can be brought into conversation.
- To open up a critical discussion about autoimmunities by exploring the different disciplinary contexts in which it is used and detailing the specific issues and phenomena (biological, social, cultural, political, etc.) that the discourse of autoimmunity has been, and is currently, central in articulating.
- To further understandings of the key conceptual and philosophical issues that arise from discussions of autoimmunity, including its history and conceptual genealogies, and in particular, to explore its use in thinking critically about orthodox notions of identity.
- To address broader questions about the value and practicalities of interdisciplinary scholarship. The conference aims to facilitate a conversation about what the sciences, humanities and social sciences can learn from one another, by encouraging scholars to engage with approaches to autoimmunity that lie outside their particular area of expertise.

Goals/Outcomes

- To demonstrate the currency of the concept of autoimmunity for disciplines outside the biomedical sciences by mapping the different journeys it has taken in a range of contexts in order to identify connections and resonances between distinct disciplinary accounts
- To promote the exchange of ideas and enhance the level of interaction between scholars and practitioners in the biomedical sciences, humanities and social sciences.
- To establish networks that will create opportunities for future collaborative and interdisciplinary research projects.
- To publish a selection of papers from the conference, both in online and paper format, either as an edited collection or special issue of a journal, that represents the diversity of contemporary perspectives on autoimmunity, and the value of interdisciplinary engagement with this topic.

Invited participants

List of suggestions will be circulated to partners and completed with them. From medicine: rheumatology, MS, diabetes, AIDS, transplantation specialist, gender expert, etc. 30 senior and junior researchers from Switzerland and abroad.

Schedule

1½-2½ days, opening in the late afternoon, with a public lecture (preferred guest: Prof. Dr. Hans-Jörg Rheinberger). Closed workshop with plenary and parallel sessions.