The Privatization of Neuroscience: The University, The State and the Moral Aims of Science

2010-11-10 06:25:00

By

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From *New York Times* Op-ed pieces to educational toys for toddlers, the culture of neuroscience has far exceeded the confines of the laboratory. Anthropologists and others have traced neuroscience's entry into the everyday – the courtroom, the pharmacy, the boardroom and the clinic. Yet, a more subtle transformation around neuroscience has escaped comment. At the research university, now entrenched in collaboration with private industry, an important transition is afoot.

Across the U.S. and Europe, universities have started something called 'translational neuroscience centers' – part of larger shifts at the university such as growing commercialization and changes in prioritization and funding. Translational neuroscience aims to move beyond the theoretical advances of basic neuroscience and to focus on creating applications such as– drugs, medical devices and diagnostics. While industry-university collaboration has a long history, translational science makes its patent-aspirations and corporate entanglements explicit by sidelining concerns about objectivity and undue influence. But the emergence of this kind of academic work is more than merely a product of the intermingling of academic knowledge and market logics. With fieldwork underway among translational neuroscience communities in northern California, I've been attentive to the relationships on which this collaborative practice relies.

Long before science and technology studies (STS) turned to the laboratory as an ethnographic object, anthropologists had traced the ways that knowledge production was embedded in and dependent upon the social. Accordingly, the phenomenal growth of translational neuroscience is not without context: The adoption of the Bayh-Dole Act in 1980 allowed universities to patent scientific and technological inventions that occurred through public (federal) money. Since Bayh-Dohl, universities have become patent obsessed. Northwestern University, for instance, made $700 million dollars from the sale of royalties to a pharmaceutical group in

2007.

President Obama's stimulus plan included an increase of 3.2% allotted to the National Institutes of Health – a major funder of neuroscience research. The funding was framed with the idea that neuroscience research might translate into jobs and economic uplift. Neurotechnology (brain-based devices, drugs and diagnostics) is projected to be a $145 billion industry. Thus, translational neuroscience requires and invites a way of thinking about neuroscience in relation to its capacity for translation into other agendas. This ethos is part of how universities and scientists have begun to think about neuroscience (and other fields). At one biotechnology conference, I observed strategy discussions about how to make university research more conducive to private investment. Here, university neuroscience has become envisioned as a space of market discovery. Encompassing everything from obesity to depression, the widening scope of what is considered a 'neurological disorder' has meant an explosion in the market potential of neurotechnologies. A group of investors, scientists and companies converged to propose to congress a National Neurotechnology Initiative. A key contention in the proposal is that the United States "Must Lead the Neurotechnology Revolution."

Translational neuroscience in the U.S., broadly viewed, indexes sets of relationships; between science and the market; between neuroscientists and investors; between the University and the State; and between a relatively new science and it's various publics. In all these contexts one finds a sustained rhetoric about neuroscience's potentials – to save lives, stimulate the economy, create personal wealth, advance science, and to restore the U.S.'s dominance in science. As universities begin to openly acknowledge drug discovery as part of their mission, the "bridge" represented by translational science and medicine is inevitably a two-way street. The priorities of funders and the financial opportunities entailed are likely to affect not only the priorities of research, but also the ways in which that research is understood, culturally and ethically, by those who carry it out.

Universities have little to do to convince constituencies of neuroscience's value. In a context of a tumultuous economy and budget cuts, occasions emerge in which to interrogate the value of universities and academic work. Neuroscience in the university has become a key object in a larger debate about useful and productive knowledge. The simultaneity of the 'humanities crisis' and the shift towards translation is no coincidence. Yet, the value of neuroscience is also about its capacity as an entry-point into the market – for universities, for investors, for the State and as evidence for claims about the moral and material value of knowing.

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This post is simultaneously being published in the Association for Political and Legal Anthropology *(APLA) column in* Anthropology News*. Many thanks to the APLA section editor for Anthropology News,* Noelle J. Molé *(Princeton), for allowing us to reprint it here.*

AMA citation
. The Privatization of Neuroscience: The University, The State and the Moral Aims of Science. *Somatosphere*. . Available at: . Accessed October 1, 2012.

APA citation
. (). *The Privatization of Neuroscience: The University, The State and the Moral Aims of Science*. Retrieved October 1, 2012, from Somatosphere Web site:

Chicago citation
. . The Privatization of Neuroscience: The University, The State and the Moral Aims of Science. Somatosphere. (accessed October 1, 2012).

Harvard citation
, *The Privatization of Neuroscience: The University, The State and the Moral Aims of Science*, Somatosphere. Retrieved October 1, 2012, from <>

MLA citation
. "The Privatization of Neuroscience: The University, The State and the Moral Aims of Science." . Somatosphere. Accessed 1 Oct. 2012.<>