

Guenther, Katja: *Localization and Its Discontents. A Genealogy of Psychoanalysis and the Neuro Disciplines*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2015. ISBN: 978-0-226-28820-8; 310 S.

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Katja Guenther's book is about the relationship between neurology and psychoanalysis. And the tool used to explore the relationship is the physiological model of reflex action. That model suggested that nervous disorders could be attributed to disruptions at specific locations along a neural arc that connected sense organs and muscles and that passed through the spinal cord or brain. Guenther argues that the appropriation, adaptation, and criticism of the reflex model, which informed much neuropsychiatric research in the 1870s and 80s, provided the resources for the construction of both psychoanalysis and neurology. Specifically, both emerged from a „break with the localization project“ that was enabled by their respective deployment of so-called „connective principles“ (p. 7). According to Guenther, this common origin in a rebellion against patho-anatomic localization belies claims that their relationship is irreconcilably „asymmetrical“ and rooted in a fundamental „ontological opposition“ (p. 187f.) between soma and psyche.

In arguing the case for greater genealogical comity, Guenther's story hews to some of the most classical tropes within the history of science: the book is about 'great men', their ideas and theories, how they influenced and critiqued each other's work, and what theoretical and practical resistances they faced. Each chapter is devoted to a single protagonist (Theodor Meynert, Carl Wernicke, Sigmund Freud, Otfried Foerster, Paul Schilder, Wilder Penfield), each of whom Guenther takes to be part of a „family tree“ (p. 6) and constitutive of broader disciplinary trends in the way that they „rearticulated the relationship between localization and connectivity“ (p. 9). The plausibility of Guenther's argument depends crucially on whether in fact these men can stand *pars pro toto* for their respective

disciplines; or conversely, whether and how the inclusion of other actors, say for example Wilhelm Wundt or Carl G. Jung, might well debunk her findings.

Nevertheless, Guenther does an admirable job explicating her protagonists' views about localization and connectivism and demonstrating how those views translated (or not) into specific research practices. Without doubt the most valuable contribution of the book is Guenther's close reading of her protagonists' scientific texts. A review of this scope can in no way do justice to her incisive analysis of these texts or to the subtle conclusions that she draws from them.

A review of this scope can, however, address two of Guenther's more general aims. The first proceeds from a present-day predicament within neuroscientific research: according to Guenther, neuroscience is „caught between contradictory principles“ of localization and connectivity (p. 3). Exploring the common roots of both disciplines from the perspective of the reflex model can provide the „means for thinking through our present situation“ (p. 6). In other words, the book is an attempt to apply history toward the management of the (inter-)disciplinary tensions facing the neurosciences, as a kind of therapeutic counseling service for apparently dysfunctional relationships.

Whether history is really in a position to do this heavy lifting of interdisciplinary collaboration in the neurosciences is at best a dubious proposition. But more importantly and unsurprisingly, using history to ameliorate this problem results in a radical narrowing of historical understanding and contingency. One illustration of this is Guenther's complete ellipsis from her story of figures like Gustav Fechner or Wilhelm Wundt. Specifically, the publication of Wundt's „Grundzüge der physiologischen Psychologie“ in 1874 is entirely apropos to Guenther topic. And his doctrine of psychophysical parallelism was certainly, as Mai Wegener has shown<sup>1</sup>, enormously influential in late 19th century Germany, not least for the resistance it put up

<sup>1</sup> Mai Wegener, Der psychophysische Parallelismus: Zu einer Diskursfigur im Feld der wissenschaftlichen Umbrüche des ausgehenden 19. Jahrhunderts, in: Zeitschrift für Geschichte der Wissenschaften, Technik und Medizin 17 (2009), pp. 277–316.

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against the monistic dogmas of the era. And yet Guenther has nothing whatsoever to say about Wundt or psychophysical parallelism, presumably because the entire notion that there are different psychological and neurophysiological causalities is anathema within contemporary neuroscience and thus unlikely to help us „think through our present situation“.

The same problem arises in relation not just to the scientists outside her purview, but also to those directly on her radar, such as Sigmund Freud. According to Guenther, the „unconscious was born“ from Freud’s neurological work, that „allowed him [...] to imagine the possibility of higher functions detached from consciousness“ (p. 86). But this claim is almost certainly false. For more than a century, mesmerists and animal magnetists – to say nothing of some metaphysicians<sup>2</sup> – had been imagining exactly this possibility. And Freud knew it. So, to imply that this insight derived solely from his early neurological writings is simply implausible. It is one of many examples of how, by restricting her perspective, Guenther misinterprets her historical protagonists and instead serves them up for contemporary neuroscientific appropriation.

A second aim of the book is to address more general concerns about the „disciplinary imperialism“ and „hegemony“ of the neurosciences (p. 190). Guenther argues that the „surprising proximity“ between neuroscience and psychoanalysis can help „reframe anxieties“ that neuroscience is „overrunning other academic disciplines“ (pp. 190, 12). Indeed, insofar as history can „cultivate a symmetrical relationship“ between them, Guenther suggests that neuroscience might „open itself to the humanities rather than simply engulfing them“ (pp. 189f.). In other words, in addition to its role as a therapeutic counseling service, history can help to defang the bogeyman of neuroscience.

But this too seems to be asking far more from history than it can deliver. And history will certainly fail to deliver on this promise if, as in Guenther’s case, the analysis remains so closely tethered to ontological, conceptual, or practical issues, while at the same time largely ignoring the disciplinary politics and power

of the neurosciences. Simply „being attentive to the complexities and intentions within scientific texts“ (p. 190) is a necessary, but in no way sufficient condition for bridging the gap between psychoanalysis and the neurosciences. And as a result, the suggestion that her study might help assuage anxieties in the humanities is sapped of credibility.

Guenther’s interpretations may well enliven contemporary neuroscientific debate. And for that they are not without merit. But they provide us with only the narrowest of windows onto the past. Guenther has effectively reduced the past in ways that make it more amenable and productive within contemporary neuroscientific discourse.

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<sup>2</sup>Günter Gödde, Traditionslinien des ‘Unbewußten’: Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Freud, 2nd ed., Tübingen 2009.