

WHO CARES ABOUT NEUROSCIENCE NOW?

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Abstract:

Hard as it may be to believe, there was a time when neuroscience was one of the hot topics in STS. During the “decade of the brain” in the 1990s, huge amounts of public money and public interest were invested in the brain sciences - an attention that spilled over into STS. Key works by prominent STS scholars took the new brain sciences to task for their reductionism (Martin, 2004), saw them as a site for the recreation of identity (Dumit, 2004), worried that they were medicalizing childhood (Rapp, 2011), located them as a site for new universe of knowledge and belief (Ortega and Vidla, 2011), proposed a new form of critical friendship between them and the social sciences (Rose and Abi-Rached, 2013), and so on.

Up to about 2015, then, neuroscience was a major site of debate and interest in STS. And yet it is clear that, today, neuroscience is no longer a major site of interest in STS, nor is it the location of major disagreements or pronouncements in the field. The word “neuroscience” did not appear in either the title nor the abstract of any of the 217 panels accepted for joint EASST/4S conference held in 2020; neither did the word appear in any of the titles or short abstracts of the 210 open panels offered at 4S 2021.

This panel has two goals. One is to re-situate the neurosciences - and the psychological sciences in which they are at least partly nested - at the heart of contemporary understandings of self and society, whether in discussions of mental health and wellbeing (Pickersgill et al., 2017), sport (Hollin, 2021), understandings of the self (Vidal and Ortega, 2017), racialization (Rollins, 2021), contemporary city living (Rose & Fitzgerald, 2022), cultural theory (Pitts-Taylor, 2016), or everyday life (Schregel and Broer, 2020). At the heart of the panel is a claim that understanding the brain and brain sciences remains a key task for Science and Technology Studies.

But the panel also invites reflection on the strange absence of neuroscience in contemporary STS. If these sciences are as consequential as we believe, why so little interest? Is this due to an inherent problem of the sciences themselves, which have lost public prominence after many of the promises of the decade of the brain failed to materialise? Is it to do with the dispersal of “neuroscience” into computational and algorithmic approaches? Or does it have something to do with STS itself, a field tacitly (and not always only tacitly) governed by fashion and in-group dynamics, where apparently hot topics quickly attain self-fulfilling dynamics.

For this panel we invite contributions that turn our attention back towards neuroscience through these two forms of attention. Indicative topics include:

The brain and the environment

The brain and social practice

The brain in theory
The brain and technological imaginaries
The brain and racial justice
The brain and gender
The brain and (mental) health
The brain and STS

Key words:

Brains, Neurosciences, Psy-sciences