

Rethinking Materialism: Perspectives from the History of Science and Philosophy

Round Table Discussion, Braunschweig, June 13, 2018

Organization: Florence Vienne

Location: TU Braunschweig, Beethovenstr. 55, D-38106 Braunschweig,
5th floor: Bibliothek der Abteilung für Pharmaziegeschichte

Background information and ideas for this round table discussion
by *Florence Vienne* (Technische Universität, Braunschweig)

This meeting brings together doctoral students and scholars of various disciplines – pharmacy, biology, history of science, gender studies and philosophy – to discuss the issue of materialism from the perspective of history of science and philosophy. We are very pleased that two external guests – historian of science Lynn Nyhart (University of Wisconsin, Madison) and philosopher Susanne Lettow (Freie Universität, Berlin) – have agreed to take part in our discussion. Lynn Nyhart and I share a common interest in the dispute on materialism (“Materialismus-Streit”) of the post-1848 revolutionary era. More precisely, we investigate the positions of the German founders of cell theory, Matthias Jacob Schleiden and Theodor Schwann, in this dispute. Besides the theory of evolution, cell theory is regarded as biology’s crucial contribution to a modern and secular worldview. Yet, scholars have so far paid little attention to the fact that Schwann and Schleiden themselves rejected the materialist outlook on nature and humankind that many of their contemporaries associated with cell theory. What makes the case of Schleiden particularly interesting is that he is also regarded as an outspoken critic of speculative romantic *Naturphilosophie* and a main promoter of biology’s emancipation from philosophy. In the first part of our meeting, I propose to discuss Schleiden’s essay of 1863 (see full reference below) which highlights his position on materialism and on the relationship between natural sciences, philosophy and religion.

The second part is dedicated to Susanne Lettow’s and Jan Büssers’s critical reflection on the “new materialism” of today’s social sciences and feminist theory. The paper by Lettow (2016) addresses theoretical and political problems raised by this “material turn” in the light of the history of materialism, more exactly in the light of different versions of historical materialism (e.g. of Karl Marx, Ernst Bloch). I suggest that we take the argument of her paper as a basis to discuss whether “new materialism” can provide new insights on the history of 19th century materialism. Finally, Jan Büssers (TU Braunschweig) will present his doctoral project. He will explain how he intends to use Ernst Bloch’s historical materialism to overcome the theoretical and political shortcomings of Karen Barad’s posthumanist theory.

The overall aim of this round table discussion is to enhance a dialogue between historians of science and philosophers on the issue of materialism. It is funded by the DFG research project “Cell theory and Religious Worldview in the Nineteenth Century: A Study on

Theodor Schwann's Unpublished Writings" (see <https://www.tu-braunschweig.de/pharmazie-geschichte/mitarbeiter/florencevienne/index.html>).

Program

11:30-12:00	Welcome & Introduction by Florence Vienne
12:00-13:30	Matthias J. Schleiden's position in the dispute on materialism of the 1850s and 1860s Discussion of the following two texts: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Introduction to <i>Der Materialismus-Streit</i> ed. by Kurt Bayertz, Myriam Gerhard and Walter Jaeschke (Hamburg, 2012), ix-xxxiv• Matthias J. Schleiden: "Über den Materialismus der neueren deutschen Naturwissenschaft, sein Wesen und seine Geschichte. Zur Verständigung für die Gebildeten." (1863), reprinted in Bayertz et al. <i>Der Materialismus-Streit</i> (Hamburg, 2012), 283-338
13:30-14:30	Lunch
14:30-15:30	'New Materialism' and 'Historical Materialism' Discussion of Susanne Lettow's paper: "Turning the turn: New materialism, historical materialism and critical theory", in: <i>Thesis Eleven</i> , 2016, 1-16)
15:30-16:30	Neuer Materialismus (Ernst Bloch) and New Materialism (Karen Barad): How to make matter matter again? Presentation and discussion of Jan Büssers's PhD project
16:30-17:15	Concluding discussion