“The Life Sciences after World War II: Institutional Change and International Connections”

May 16-17, 2014
University of Pittsburgh

This conference, the second in a series of conferences on world-historical views of the history of science, addresses the theoretical and empirical work of researchers in the life sciences, from 1945 to 2000, in the context of changing scientific institutions, shifting socio-political regimes, and advancing knowledge. The scope of life sciences, for our purposes, includes disciplines ranging from medicine and biology to psychology and public health, and we hope to explore the ramifications of these disciplines in other fields. For both historians of the life sciences and world historians, the post-WWII period remains relatively underexamined. We seek interventions in interpretation of these fields from scholars based in history, history of science and medicine, social sciences and natural sciences. In particular, we are seeking papers that address any aspect of the life sciences from a global/world history perspective.

We have developed an initial conceptualization of some main processes in scientific research and invite paper proposals that pursue these issues or, indeed, argue that other processes are of equal significance. We see the postwar history of science as a period marked by dramatic advances in knowledge of the life sciences during a time of increasing international collaboration. At the same time, new research occurred within a climate fraught with Cold-War enmities and the suspicions brought on by decolonization. The institutions of scientific research expanded not only through growing universities but through private corporations and the expansion of national offices to support and direct research.

Postwar researchers and policy makers in many situations emphasized the role of science in efforts to bring about development, of particular interest because of the centrality of decolonization in postwar years. Concern with development brought about expanded international connections which saw knowledge shared and transferred through such mechanisms as brain drains, professional and educational exchange programs, and joint research enterprises. Concurrently, global institutions including the UN, UNESCO, the WHO, and the World Bank were important actors during this time period and endeavors such as the International Biology Program and worldwide disease eradication campaigns broadened the scale of scientific research. Consequently, the collection of global data demanded new collaborations among researchers, funding bodies, and scientific organizations.

Key questions of interest include:
- How did these processes affect the development of the life sciences?
- In what way did new international institutions shape scientific development?
- What did the impact of these large global institutions look like on the ground?
- How did the science policies of nation-states play out in the global arena?
- To what extent were local scientific actors impacted by alterations in the global scientific landscape?
- How did international commercial forces contribute to these changes?
- What can varied disciplinary approaches tell us about the globalization of science in the post-WWII period?
- What new insights can world historians obtain from the study of recent scientific history?

Beyond these broad questions, comments and suggestions are welcomed on other aspects of the life sciences after World War II that are significant to the conference. This period has received comparatively little attention from both world historians and historians of the life sciences and our hope is that this meeting will provide an opportunity to bridge some of the gaps both within and between these two subdisciplines. We expect to revise and refine conference priorities in response to such discussion.

Papers will be peer-reviewed and selected on the basis of individual strength and thematic coherence. In addition to presentation at the conference, papers will be considered for inclusion in a conference volume to be published by the University of Pittsburgh Press (the conference and publication are supported by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to the University of Pittsburgh). Papers not included in the volume may feature in a special issue on international connections in the life sciences in a journal dedicated to global history.

Proposals (ranging from 500 to 1000 words) should include some indication of research methods, temporal organization, and reference to any links between the proposal and the wider global, disciplinary, and historical questions identified in the Call for Papers. Proposals which incorporate interdisciplinary approaches are particularly welcomed.

Proposals are due December 1, 2013 and should be sent to matsavelli@gmail.com. Those accepted will be notified by January 20, 2014. The conference will be held at the University of Pittsburgh and we have secured funding to assist with travel and accommodation expenses.

For more information, see http://www.worldhistory.pitt.edu/

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