



Angela Matyssek. *Rudolf Virchow. Das Pathologische Museum: Geschichte einer wissenschaftlichen Sammlung um 1900.* Darmstadt: Steinhoff Verlag, 2002. 184 S. + 91 Abb. EUR 49.95 (broschiert), ISBN 978-3-7985-1370-9.



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Politics in Formaldehyde: Rudolf Virchow's Pathological Museum and the Ideology of Science

This volume is the first in a series published by the *Medizinhistorisches Museum* in Berlin. The museum opened in 1998 using the collections of the Pathological Museum opened by Rudolf Virchow nearly a century earlier. (The new museum's website is <http://www.charite.de/ch/patho/WebpageBMM/>.) Angela Matyssek's volume is a marvelous announcement of this transformation of the diseased organs, deformed infants, and pathological tissues from objects of natural science to objects of historical interpretation. The volume does a nice job of presenting the history of the pathological museum, making wide use of archival sources, and even reproducing in full Rudolf Virchow's delightful opening day speech and a 1901 pamphlet on the museum. The volume's greatest achievement is its genealogy of the museum specimens, in precisely the sense recommended by Nietzsche in his *Genealogy of Morals*: "the whole history of a 'thing,' an organ, a tradition can ... be a continuous chain of signs, continually revealing new interpretations and adaptations.... The 'development' of a thing, a tradition, an organ is therefore ... a succession of more or less profound, more or less mutually independent processes of subjugation" (p. 12).

Precisely how Virchow subjugated these organs to his own project is well summed up in a quotation from Emil Cioran with which Matyssek begins her text: "Like all iconoclasts I destroyed my idols only to bow before their fragments" (p. 1) Virchow regarded the pathological museum, and especially its public "*Schausammlung*," as a means of transforming into scientific specimens objects that had formerly been gawked at as supernatural freaks or venerated as relics. The collection, with more than twenty-thousand specimens, was by far the largest in Europe. Most of the museum was reserved for students in medicine or pathology. The public portion of the museum, however, formed a kind of anti-church, open only on Sundays, Matyssek notes, directly after the church services with which it competed. While pathology students were trained to examine the various specimens by feeling and even smelling them, the public was treated only to the spectacle of rows of glass jars. By training the public in what Virchow called the "*unmittelbare Anschauung*" (unmediated/immediate observation) of objects previously coded as supernatural, Virchow hoped to train the public to bow before his idols, the idols of a secular science.

In an especially fascinating chapter on the objects themselves, Matyssek shows how these new idols of science were anything but unmediated. Especially interesting in this regard is her focused interpretation of individual objects, showing the aesthetic dimension and historical references in, for example, conjoined (Siamese) twins or a microcephalic fetus. The latter had actually been arranged to point its left index finger at the viewer from inside the jar of spirits in which it floats. The author contextualizes these objects of science in a genealogy of anatomical preparations from the religious and aesthetic presentations of the seventeenth century to the commercial presentations of Gunter von Hagen's recent *Körperwelten* exhibition.

I would have liked Matyssek to treat the contradictions within Virchow's ideology of science even more thoroughly. There was a real tension in the displacement of religion by science in the Pathological Museum. On the one hand, it represented a real change from religion to science, and a real process of secularization and rationalization. On the other hand, this secularization consisted, as in the quotation from Cioran, simply in the creation of a new religion, differing only accidentally from the old religion. Such science as religion or ideology was still, ultimately, an authoritarian doctrine meant to be worshipped rather than engaged critically.

As Matyssek makes clear, Virchow's interest in promoting science among the lay public stemmed in large part from his well-known support for the *Kulturkampf*. Although the museum itself was founded after the *Kulturkampf*, Virchow himself adhered to his suspicion of "ultramontanism." While Virchow and others regarded the *Kulturkampf* as a struggle for science and "*Kultur*" (what we would today call civilization) against the influence of Catholicism in public life, the struggle was neither religiously nor ethnically neutral. Indeed, the *Kulturkampf* was often explicitly anti-Polish and, as Michael Gross has shown, liberal Jews also worried about an easy slide from anti-Catholicism to anti-Semitism.[1] While Virchow himself described the *Kulturkampf* in the language of science versus religion, it was, in fact, as much about enforcing religious conformism as about secularization. Virchow and the *Kulturkämpfer* were no atheists, or even secularists, but rather, as a Graham Chapman character describes himself in *Monty Python's Meaning of Life*: "Protestant! And fiercely proud of it!"

If Virchow's commitment to a particular religion has been underestimated, his commitment to a non-ideological science has been overestimated. As a Prus-

sian liberal, Virchow detested socialists as much as he detested Catholics. Thus, in his famous lecture on the "Freedom of Science," Virchow advocated banning Darwinism from schools because it lent support to socialism.[2] One of the main purposes of displaying deformed individuals in his pathological museum was to counter not only religious interpretations of these objects, but also Darwinist interpretations of these objects as "atavisms." Atavisms were the reappearance of animal-like characteristics in humans and were supposed to constitute evidence of the animal origins of humans. Virchow spent much time and energy in his own museum and in the panopticons of Berlin arguing against these so-called atavisms in order to undermine Darwinism. Matyssek emphasizes that Virchow opposed Darwinism because of the speculative nature of the evidence for evolution. However, she might also have brought out this anti-socialist aspect of Virchow's ideology, an aspect that may well have contributed to his desire to bring his pathology to the public.

Matyssek persuasively argues that Virchow saw his museum as a way to oppose the germ theory of disease, especially as represented by his colleague Robert Koch. Virchow held fast to his own "cellular pathology," which explained disease as the result of changes in cells rather than invasion by foreign bacteria, as Koch and others believed. Virchow had been among the main opponents of the Hungarian physician Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis, whose recommendation, based on a germ theory of disease, that physicians wash their hands before delivering babies, might otherwise have earlier begun to save countless mothers from death by puerperal fever. The point here is not to use the science of the twenty-first century to bash the science of the nineteenth, but rather to emphasize that there is no such thing as science (or religion) in general.

It is tempting to read Matyssek's book in the political context of the new Medizinhistorisches Museum, much as Matyssek herself reads Virchow's work in the political context of the Pathological Museum upon which the new museum is based. Just as Virchow tried to present his objects as scientific against religious, superstitious, and popular cultural uses of freakish bodies, so too does Matyssek present the objects of the museum as historical against, for example, Gunter von Hagen's *Körperwelten* exhibition (website: <http://www.koerperwelten.de/>). Hagen, an anatomist, has taken corpses treated with a plasticizing process and displayed them in various aesthetic and even humorous poses in order, he claims, to make anatomy accessible for all. This exhibition aroused some controversy in

Germany, for it treats the dead in an uncustomary and possibly disrespectful manner for commercial purposes. Matyssek writes that *Körperwelten* exhibits a veneration for the market, as typical for our century as the veneration for science was for Virchow's century.

Angela Matyssek's book is not only a welcome introduction to the museum itself, but also an important contribution to the history of anatomical displays and an exemplar of a genealogical reading of scientific objects.

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Notes

[1]. Michael B. Gross, "Kulturkampf and Unification: German Liberalism and the War against the Jesuits," *Central European History* 30 (1998): pp. 545-566.

[2]. Rudolf Virchow, *Die Freiheit der Wissenschaft im modernen Staat* (Berlin: Wiegandt, Hempel & Parey, 1877).