Title
Spectrums of Diversity and Exchange: 2007 Mephistos Graduate Student Conference

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Author
Davis, Ann Marie

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s the sun set in hues of lavender and coral behind Drake Stadium, some two dozen graduate students made their way up the hill from Bruin Plaza, past Ackerman Student Union, toward Royce Hall. Chatting casually as they walked, the students had one striking thing in common; they each carried a canary yellow, square-shaped program with the cryptic words “mephistos 25” boldly printed across the cover.

If a passerby were to overhear their light exchanges, she would learn that most of them had flown in from around the world just that day. Many of them discussed having endured long flights and jet lag, but they looked forward to a stimulating and productive weekend that began that evening. Acting as their guides, some UCLA students accompanied the group, also eagerly anticipating the weekend’s upcoming events.

Who were these young academics and why were they gathering at UCLA? What were the mysterious yellow pamphlets in their hands—and what could the words “mephistos” and “25” printed across them mean? According to Wikipedia, the free content encyclopedia online, the word “mephisto” refers to at least twenty-four different cultural events and phenomena around the world.

However, the web site overlooks the title’s most recent and relevant significance for the cluster of students and professors gathering at Royce Hall from April 6 to 8. Add “s” to the title “Mephisto” and, for these scholars, the word refers to a twenty-five-year-old academic tradition: a traveling, international, interdisciplinary conference organized annually by and for graduate students. This year it was organized by a group of UCLA graduate students. Based on the conference’s traditional subject matter, its title breaks down into the densely packed acronym, MEPHISTOS, for Medicine, Philosophy, History, Science, Technology, and OS for (SO)ciology.

Not surprisingly, the conference has witnessed a number of innovations and changes since its inception at Princeton University in 1981. Among the most significant developments this year was the decision by student organizers to widen the applicant pool, strongly encouraging scholars from anthropology as well as other science studies disciplines to attend.
Consequently, student invitees to MEPHISTOS 2007 represented a broad variety of research backgrounds including philosophy; history; science, technology and society; anthropology; art history; modern thought and literature; and communication studies. As to be expected, such a wide array of disciplines bespoke a broad spectrum of topics.

Perhaps most suggestive of the vibrant and rich exchange that was to take place at this year’s conference was its official poster (pictured above). Sporting colorful rows of emission and absorption spectra, it suggests a fitting metaphor for the rich and variegated diversities that ultimately characterized this year’s gathering. Designed by organizing committee member and UCLA Ph.D. student Sameer Shah, the multiple rainbow-colored strips decorating the poster allude to scientific technologies and movements—such as the boom in spectroscopy analysis in the 1860s—that conference goers, or “mephistians,” tend to choose as research topics. As fellow practitioners of “science studies,” mephistians come from diverse research backgrounds, but they apply interdisciplinary methods for situating “scientific expertise” in broad social, historical and philosophical contexts. Although sometimes critical of certain scientific practices, their research often suggests the possibility of broader public participation in the formation of science policy.

Moving from campus to campus over the last quarter century, the conference found its way to Royce Hall this year after a ten-year interim away from UCLA. In recent years, MEPHISTOS has passed through the University of Western Ontario (2004), Brown University (2005), and the University of Chicago (2006). After presenting papers last year in Chicago, students Dan Crosby and Alix Hui jointly accepted the responsibility to lead a group of graduate students in organizing the 2007 conference at UCLA. The two put together a committee of thirteen. Representing the Departments of Anthropology, History, Philosophy, and Sociology, the organizing committee was composed of students whose research overlapped based on their shared interests in science studies. Despite their varied backgrounds and disciplines, each of the organizers felt mutually committed to fostering interdisciplinary exchange and collaboration at the conference.

Participants notwithstanding, perhaps the most decisive and fortuitous boon for the conference this year, however, was its wealth and variety of supporters, whose generous support was indispensable to the conference’s success. Without doubt, the supporters deserves special recognition and thanks: The Southern California Colloquium in the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine; Department of History; the History of Science Field; the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies; the Division of Social Sciences; UCLA History of Medicine; the Center for European and Eurasian Studies; the Center for 17th and 18th Century Studies; the Center for Society and Genetics; the Center for international Science, Technology and Cultural Policy; the Division of Humanities; the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies; the Department of Sociology; the Department of Philosophy; the Department of Anthropology; the Neuroscience History Archive (NHA); the Graduate Division, and the Center for the Study of Women.

Indeed, the conference was remarkably rich—both figuratively and literally—on a number of fronts. In addition to its wide variety of themes and topics, MEPHISTOS 2007 also boasted a diverse array of speakers hailing from across the continent and around the world. With participants traveling from as far as Madrid, Spain, and India, the conference was a virtual and intellectual Mecca for young scholars interested in discussing their research and developing collaborations across the field of science studies. Among the two dozen invited to the conference, seven nationalities and four continents were represented.

On April 6, 2007, the conference was opened with brief remarks from co-directors, Dan Crosby and Alix Hui, both Ph.D. candidates in History of Science at UCLA. In the tradition of MEPHISTOS, Crosby and Hui stressed that the meeting was to be positive and supportive, allowing students to share their research, participate in discussions, and collaborate with others in diverse fields. A keynote speech by Professor Soraya de Chadarevian, who holds a joint appointment in the History Department and the new Center for Society and Genetics at UCLA, followed. Discussing her recent research, de Chadarevian gave a provocative, hour-long presentation on “Bombs, Mice, and Humans, Tales of Twentieth Century Science,” which detailed a case study on the relationship between atomic politics in post-war Britain and the course of genetics research in the late twentieth century.

The next two days were packed with panels and student presentations. Fortunately, each speaker had time to respond to questions and comments after presenting. At the end of each panel, the UCLA student moderators addressed the panel as a whole, pointing out common issues and themes. After the comments of the moderators, panels were opened for questions to the group.

In the spirit of diversity, the topics of the panels varied widely from the politics and economics of science and technology; histories of health and medicalization, and competing discourses in scientific knowledge. (A detailed schedule and panel abstracts are available at http://mephistos.bol.ucla.edu). Perhaps most relevant for researchers of women’s and gender studies was the session entitled
“What Lies Between? Constructing & Complicating the Boundaries of Sex & Rationality.” In this session, speakers addressed topics ranging from early modern alchemy and hermaphroditism; gender ideology in twentieth-century sex chromosome research; nineteenth-century observations of sexual “pathologies” and “norms” in the “savage of Aveyron”; and present-day assumptions and debates on bodies with “ambiguous genitalia.” Above all, by addressing assumptions that spanned four centuries, the panel successfully demonstrated that no matter how “scientific” or systematic, definitions of “womanhood,” “manhood,” and “sex” are never fixed but in a constant state of flux.

Other MEPHISTOS panels also proffered analytic tools for research on women and gender. A panel on the histories of fitness, aging, and nutrition, for example, suggested useful frameworks with which scholars might explore parallel links between gendered bodies and public health regimes. Similarly, another panel on “medicalized subjects,” underscored instances where typically male-dominated professions such as medicine have extended beyond the “public” realm into distinctly domestic spaces or activist women’s hospitals. Finally, important ties between women’s studies and other interdisciplinary fields were amply suggested in presentations on social/scientific representations of racialized bodies.

As these examples suggest, the conference’s emphasis on interdisciplinarity provided an especially open and rich venue where integrative fields such as women’s studies could prosper and thrive. Commenting on this very aspect, participant Kirstin Borgerson (Department of Philosophy, University of Toronto, Canada) applauded this year’s event for “bringing together a variety of disciplines” not only in the presentations but also on the organizing committee. Borgerson, who also presented at the conference in 2006, stated that she “was particularly impressed by the presence of faculty members at the conference—too often graduate conferences exist in their own little bubble even though they are some of the best places to look for innovative and exciting new research.” Finally, in terms of creating opportunities for women, Borgerson added that she was “very pleased to see that over half of the conference participants were women. I know this is an improvement over past years.”

Kalil Oldham (Department of History, University of California, Berkeley), who had also presented at a previous MEPHISTOS conference, agreed with Borgerson. “It was great to see some UCLA faculty turn up for the conference,” he noted. In addition, he said the panels were “well put together” and “left time for speakers to respond to individual questions and comments rather than only having a group comment at the end.” Echoing Oldham’s sentiments, Professor Sharon Traweek (Department of History, UCLA) applauded the organizing committee for its “intellectual planning,” which resulted in “subtle and interesting” panels. In addition, Traweek stated that she was impressed by the conference’s “intellectual ecology”; in her opinion, conference organizers were successful in “generating a lively and congenial atmosphere, which is especially important in the development of future collegiality.” The ability to organize workshops that foster such a collegial and productive environment, she emphasized, is extremely important. In fact, it is a skill that she and her colleagues often look for when considering job candidates at UCLA.

After the first full day of panels, participants were driven to the J. Paul Getty Museum for a celebratory banquet. Before dinner, they had time to take in museum exhibitions or to simply check out the grounds while enjoying views of the setting sun beyond Santa Monica into the Pacific Ocean.

After the final two panels on Sunday morning, the last order of business remained: the organizing committee announced that Jessica Luther and Paul Rubinson, both Ph.D. students in the Department of History at University of Texas at Austin, would be the team to handle 2008.

The meeting had officially come to an end, but conference organizers and participants continued to mingle. Indicating the degree of collegiality generated that weekend, many students made plans to spend a few more hours together after lunch. Consequently, rather than quickly dispersing, about twenty students headed down toward a local restaurant in Westwood. Summing up the general mood for many participants and organizers, one student wrote to the organizing committee after the conference, “I once again want to thank you all for an amazing conference experience. It was a fabulous weekend and I just feel lucky that I got to participate in it.”

A PhD Candidate in the Department of History at UCLA, Ann Marie Davis is currently writing her dissertation on representations of prostitution in late nineteenth-century Japan. In particular, she investigates how prostitute’s bodies were targeted as objects of scientific inquiry and knowledge formation in new fields of public health, law, and criminal studies. Having organized various conferences in the past, Davis values her participation on this year’s MEPHISTOS committee as one of her best conference-organizing experiences yet!