

“Whole Brain” Politics and Brain Laterality Research

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Summary. The paper discusses a recent international conference in Munich (FRG) on brain-laterality research. An open letter on the goals of the conference is considered. In this letter, the “automatic” moral and intellectual decay of “left brain” modern society was predicted, and a clarion call for the reinsertion of “whole brain” values into our over-mechanized culture was sounded. Discussion of the conference itself focuses on the political and social risks involved in selling irrationalist ideologies – even well-meaning ones – in the name of science. The paper calls for a more responsible attitude among modern brain-laterality researchers who would participate in scientific conferences that blur the distinction between description and social prescription.

Key words: “Whole brain” politics – Brain-laterality research – Right hemisphere – Irrationalism – Ideology

From 14–17 September 1988, Munich (FRG) was host to the “First International Congress on Cerebral Dominances [*sic*]”. The goals of the conference were several: “basic research on the restoration of fundamental right and left hemisphere functions following brain disease” and “the application of cerebral dominances to management, with special focus on creativity and personality development”. In addition, a subsection of the conference concentrated on relationships

between “cerebral dominances” and youth-oriented religious sects.

The international roster of invited guests at the conference was impressive, including scientists from France, Great Britain, Israel, Italy, Japan, Yugoslavia, Canada, Austria, Switzerland, the Soviet Union and the United States, and featuring such leading names in the neurosciences as Michael S. Gazzaniga (who ultimately did not attend), Karl H. Pribram, Tadanobu Tsunoda and Hans Zeier.

A month before the scheduled beginning of the conference, Dr. Claus H. Bick, the conference chairman and president of the newly founded “International Society on Cerebral Dominances e. V.”, circulated an open letter among the neuroscientists planning to present scientific papers at Munich (Bick 1988). We note that, after receiving this letter, a number of these scientists chose not to attend the conference after all.

The letter made it clear that this First International Conference on Cerebral Dominances had a goal above and beyond the traditional one of advancing the cause of scientific knowledge: participating scientists were all also being called upon to support – if not actually to join – the fight against an alleged tyrannizing of Western society by so-called left-hemispheric ways of thinking. The left hemisphere represented dry, linguistic, logical, analytical and computer-like rationality. Dr. Bick, speaking for the International Society for Cerebral Dominances opposed this side of the brain to the allegedly intuitive, mystical holistic, emotional, creative and synthetic capacities of the right hemisphere, which was represented as a victim of heartless discrimination in our social and educational system. It was time, according to Dr. Bick, to

join forces and put an end to this oppression and injustice.

Dr. Bick was quite frank in stating the social and economic benefits he expected to results from the reinsertion of “whole-brained” (*Ganzhirn*) values in our society. Among other things, it was anticipated that careful attention to the implications of modern-day brain-laterality research could help Western (and especially German) society: (1) save its young people from the sinister clutches of religious cults and drug abuse; (2) improve the health of its people (*Volk*) through the cultivation of better-balanced brains, where intuition and creativity are given their due respect beside (if not above) the (probably much less interesting) virtues of dull, analytical reasoning; (3) get behind the secret of Japanese worldwide economic success, which – according to Dr. Bick – is linked to their (claimed) peculiarly non-Western pattern of lateralized brain functioning (with language functions allegedly moderated by the right hemisphere and non-verbal, emotional communication by the left).

The letter also made mention of a recently published book by one of the Society’s members, Professor Andreas Resch, which spelled out the details of the “whole-brained” social-spiritual program (Resch 1986). According to Dr. Bick, Monsignore Veraja of the Vatican has already begun using this book as one of his standard reference guides for decisions bearing on future canonizations (a sort of *Malleus Maleficorum* for identifying saints).

Perhaps even more alarming, scientists were told by Dr. Bick what may happen to Western society if it *failed* to heed the conference’s call to “whole-brainness”: *an “automatic” decay of mankind into lethargy, aggressivity, brutality and criminality*. We cite the passage where this remarkable claim was made:

Over-valuing of the left brain half [*Linkslastigkeit*] leads increasingly to a decline in intuition and creativity, that ultimately – owing to neglect of the right brain half – automatically leads to a spiritual decadence of humanity in the form of lethargy, aggressivity, brutality and criminality.

The conference itself, a month later, realized both in tone and thematic organization the general thrust of Dr. Bick’s letter. A variety of interesting experimental and clinical studies on neuropsychological and neuropsychiatric aspects of lateralized functioning were presented (including an outstanding critical contribution to the theme by Pribram).

At the same time, an overwhelming emphasis on right-hemisphere functioning was striking, even at this academic level. In addition, neuroscientists and interested laypeople were offered lectures and work-

shop on such themes as “team management and brain dominance” and the mystic “Platonic, Kabbalistic, Pythagorean and Hermetic” framework of the “split-brain double ritual”. The self-proclaimed “father of brain dominance technology”, Ned Hermann, was also there to promote, along with others, the “whole brain” approach to succeeding in business.

Now we are prepared to accept that many of the more hyperbolic rhetorical aspects of the “whole brain” movement have their source as much in ignorance and unreflected – indeed, in the case of Dr. Bick, sincere and well-meaning – emotivism as in a deliberate desire to manipulate or mislead. At the same time, “meaning well” is not always enough, and one must be prepared to reckon with the risk that others may be only too ready to exploit the political or profit-making potential in unconsidered ideological ventures like that of Dr. Bick. The National Socialist celebration of irrationalism and the “whole man” comes to mind here (Viereck 1965; Pois 1986), as does the American Werner Erhard’s multi-million dollar selling of transcendence through his program *est* (Marin 1975; Kornbluth 1976)¹. Judging by the response to the co-authored critical remarks read by one of us (G.O.) at the Munich conference (Harrington and Oepen, unpublished remarks)², there would seem to be a disturbing unwillingness among at least some brain researchers to reflect seriously on the process by which description in science blurs into social prescription, the role of the scientist in society, and the historical fact that irrationalistic tendencies in science have in the past been readily exploited by totalitarian political regimes (both left and right).

Arguments which use the objective-sounding language of the brain as a metaphor for making predictions of social disaster and prescribing high-minded solutions for reinstating psychological and social “whole-ness” should have no place in science [although it will not be the first time the left and right brain halves have been used for promoting various social values (see Harrington 1985, 1987)]. If, as scientists, we are dedicated to anything at all, then it must be to the values of critical discussion rather than to sloganism,

¹ *Est*: a profit-making “self-actualization” program that uses various peer-pressure, suggestive as well as classical Zen and Yoga techniques, to produce conformity and uncritical enthusiasm among followers for an ideology that (ironically enough) is ostensibly concerned with the importance of personal responsibility

² Harrington A, Oepen G (17 September 1988) On the role of emotional distractors (in science). Unpublished remarks following conference paper by G. Oepen, Opposite hemisphere irritability in schizophrenic and depressive patients. 1. Internationaler Kongress über Cerebrale Dominanzen, Munich, FRG, 14–17 September 1988. The present paper is a revised versions of those remarks

to scepticism and caution rather than to apocalyptic emotionalism, and to open-mindedness rather than to ideological rigidity – and that means open-mindedness even to “left hemispheric” ideas, even to ideas we may not like.

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