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“WHAT’S AT STAKE IN THE FAKE? INDIAN PHARMACEUTICALS, AFRICAN MARKETS, AND GLOBAL HEALTH”

LECTURE BY SARAH HODGES

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Welcome Address

“Decolonising Global Health” – it cannot be said that the Berlin Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities is not discussing its annual theme “Measuring the Living” against the backdrop of paradigms that, when applied to its own history and present, result in some painful glances. As is well known, the former Prussian Academy, in whose tradition we stand, has not yet come to terms with the colonial dimension of its history, so that we ourselves have not yet really begun to decolonise. However, I would like to briefly note that at least one working group has now been set up to research the colonial entanglements of Berlin’s academic institutions; Gabriele Metzler from Humboldt University has initiated this group and deserves our thanks.

A first step towards coming to terms with these dimensions of our Academy’s colonial history would be to review the speeches that the Academy’s executive secretary had to deliver on behalf of the Academy on the occasion of the public sessions on Friedrichstag in January and Leibniz Day in July. In 1901, the Academy – represented by the anatomist Wilhelm Waldeyer (later: von Waldeyer-Hartz), then secretary of the physical-mathematical class – welcomed the German Empire’s transition to world politics and defended colonialism. Waldeyer celebrated the German Eastern expansion of the Middle Ages as a model for modern colonial policy, since “the knights knew how to colonise so well that one would like to envy them for it today”. He stylised the bloody suppression of the Boxer Rebellion in China under the leadership of German troops as the participation “in one of the greatest political events that world history has seen, in the opening up of the hitherto most immovable and most blocked parts of Asia, an opening up that had to come as a cultural-historical necessity in the political course of development of our globe”.¹

According to the invitation flyer, your lecture, dear Ms Hodges, is about “exploring how concerns about ‘fake drugs’ can take on social, political, and economic lives of their own – lives that go far beyond any pharmacological evidence”. So, if I see correctly, this is about the peculiar dynamics that the perception of things may gain in postcolonial contexts. In other words, it is not only about the decolonisation of objective structures, but much more about more subjective regimes of perception and knowledge and, above all, about questioning the logic of supposed facts and an alleged common sense. This alleged common sense begins with many highly problematic phrases in our discourse, such as the talk about the “third world”, “the developing countries”, etc., and does not end with the frequently occurring phenomenon of policies that supposedly promote justice, while in reality only confirming alterities. So, it is more about the construction of objectivity and the consequences.

¹ Festrede, in: Sitzungsberichte der Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin. Jahrgang 1901. Erster Halbband. Januar bis Juni. Berlin: Verlag der Königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaftlichen, pp. 55–66, here pp. 56–57.

The topic of the lecture was (and the lecture itself would have been) of burning interest to me, because it shows that decolonisation is not only necessary where it (supposedly) 'imposes itself' on us (as in buildings like ours, a former state bank of the Prussian state or at the Humboldt Forum). It is also necessary in cases of more subtle, 'systemic' issues, be they continuing forms of hierarchisation and hegemony, or topics that are supposedly unaffected, normal, (more) 'innocent', or allegedly purely scientifically graspable, such as health (consider the phrase: 'We all bleed red blood' etc.).

When hearing the term 'fake', one thinks – or at least I think – not first of medication, but rather, in the context of global exploitation, of counterfeit designer clothing etc. and the terrible conditions under which it is oftentimes produced. Or of so-called fake news. If you have read publications by Ms. Hodges, however, you learn that the concern about 'fake drugs' (there are many labels for them) is globally widespread and extremely high. A rampant discourse seems to have emerged – driven by actors such as the World Health Organization – that produces a whole catalogue of supposedly correct assumptions, which, however, are primarily based on hearsay. Therefore, there is a great need for research. I am very glad that this desideratum is being outlined and addressed today and that strategies for dealing with it will become clearer.

I very much regret that I am not able to attend in person – but I am a laudator in Munich for the honorary doctorate of a good friend and I am all the more grateful that my welcome address is being read here today so that our speaker does not perceive the Academy as an impossible bunch of impossible people. Have a very pleasant stay in Berlin and an enchanting evening – I am looking forward to another opportunity for meeting you in the flesh. And now, I am wishing the speaker and everyone else a stimulating evening. Thank you for your patience!