Master Class with Prof. Vasso Kindi (University of Athens) and Prof. John Preston (University of Reading)

The Historical Turn in Philosophy of Science: Kuhn, Feyerabend, Wittgenstein (3/5 ECTS)

10th – 11th May 2013

The historical turn in philosophy of science which began in the late 1950s and early 60s rattled the way that philosophy of science was hitherto practiced. New concepts, such as paradigm, incommensurability, and theory-ladenness were introduced, and new problems were raised, such as the rationality of scientific development, the integrity of scientific practice, relativism and idealism in relation to science. The effects were very disconcerting and quickly historical philosophy of science was vehemently criticized and eventually marginalized as not meeting the standards and expectations which this turn attempted to question, for instance, an algorithmic and ahistorical understanding of rationality, or the belief in unremitting scientific progress. The reception that historical philosophy of science received obstructed the full appreciation of several important aspects concerning its roots, contentions and implications. Thus Wittgenstein was not on the agenda of mainstream philosophy of science when historical philosophy was discussed and his influence on the protagonists of this movement passed largely unnoticed; the challenge that Kuhn and Feyerabend mounted to Western rationalism was swiftly condemned rather than attended to; and the concepts of paradigm and incommensurability were demonized rather than carefully interpreted and judged.

In the seminar, we will put aside facile and worn-out categorizations and assimilations. Instead, we will revisit the work of key figures of historical philosophy of science, principally the work of Kuhn and Feyerabend, to explore the dimensions and implications which were not emphasized and generally recognized in the previous period. For instance, instead of simply dismissing rationality, the emphasis on practice shifts interest from an intellectualist understanding of rationality to the concrete practical decisions scientists have to make; and the historical dimension made prominent by historical philosophers of science calls attention to the intricate relations between philosophy and science in different historical periods and hence to the influence exercised by scientists on philosophers, e.g., by Boltzmann on Feyerabend and Wittgenstein. On this basis we hope to reach a more judicious assessment of the historical turn, its achievements and its shortcomings.

Venue: Philosophisches Seminar, Zürichbergstrasse 43, 8044 Zürich, Room: ZUP-U-8
Registration: phd@philos.uzh.ch.
No fees apply, but please note that participants are expected to have done the reading of the texts. PhD students at the UZH are required to book the module in order to get 3 or 5 credit points.
Friday, 10th May 2013

Morning 9:30 – 13:00

Session 1: Concepts and Incommensurability


Afternoon 14:30 – 18:00

Session 2: Paradigms


Saturday, 11th May 2013

Morning 9:00 – 12:00

Session 3: Feyerabend’s Case against ‘Western rationalism’


Afternoon I: 13:30 – 16:00

Session 4: Boltzmann, Wittgenstein & Feyerabend


Afternoon II: 16:30 – 19:00

Session 5: Wittgenstein’s Influence on the Historical Turn in the Philosophy of Science