

BOOK REVIEW

Marc Renneville. *Le langage des crânes. Histoire de la phrénologie*. Paris: La Découverte, 2020, 318 pp., €12, ISBN: 9782348064791.

Marc Renneville is a historian of law, criminal anthropology, and criminology. In 2000, he published *Le langage des crânes, une histoire de la phrénologie*. Twenty years later, his publisher has released a new edition of this text in a pocket format, with numerous illustrations not included in the initial version. Both versions are only available in French.

Renneville focuses primarily on “this new science”; that is, phrenology, rather than the life of its founder, Franz Joseph Gall (1758–1828). He closely examines how Gall was received in Paris and his career there, following his tour of Europe. His historical analysis situates Gall’s presentation of this new explanation of brain function in Parisian salons as a scientific and high society event. He explores the socioeconomic and political context (the Empire and Napoleon) and the medical-philosophical knowledge at the beginning of the nineteenth century in the French capital, where the Enlightenment of the previous century had taken shape. Renneville thus raises several questions: Can the acceptance of phrenology be explained by a failure of reason? Did phrenology provide a new perspective in the study of human faculties that continues to influence our current scientific reasoning?

Renneville’s monograph is complementary to the recent monumental biography on Gall by Finger and Eling (2019). These works together eliminate the temptation to rehabilitate phrenology while providing new insights into the methodology of research in the cognitive sciences. Do examples from the past protect us from what future historians will assess as incredible mistakes?

In Paris, Gall found the freedom to spread his doctrine without hindrance. Championing a biological determinism from which a morality and a social use could be deduced opened the way to a debate around the complexity of behavioral interactions and social determinants that could only take place in a country emerging from a revolution.

The new brain dissection procedure Gall used was a source of perpetual surprise for Parisian anatomists. Instead of starting with the upper part of the brain, Gall started at the spinal cord, then moved on to the brain stem and cerebellum, finishing with the supratentorial brain. His meticulous unfolding of the gyri to analyze them macroscopically and deduce “penchants” raised questions among the more knowledgeable observers who were following him in Paris. Renneville explains how Gall became involved in the *avant-garde* at the Muséum national d’histoire naturelle (Natural History Museum) in Paris, which focused on comparative anatomy in humans and animals. Gall shocked some philosophers and theologians by identifying similarities in penchants and behaviors among humans and animals that brought humans down to an animal level. An ethologist before ethology, Gall saw common qualities in animals that he considered were merely enhanced in humans. Renneville shows us the extent to which Gall was a precursor of anthropology before Paul Broca (1824–1880), and of psychology and neuroanatomy, opening the way to the cortical localization research of Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–1893) and his La Salpêtrière School.

Renneville recounts the passionate debates that phrenology inspired and the resulting political implications well after Gall’s death. He tells us how various countries, from Europe to the South Seas, responded to phrenology. He concludes his book with a comprehensive chapter describing the causes and conditions of phrenology’s decline, and the progress in experimental and comparative physiology, through the work of Charles Bell (1774–1842) and François Magendie (1783–1855).

Compared to the original edition of 20 years ago, this new edition is more affordable, better illustrated, and better presented. It explores the history of a time in science that holds many lessons for the present.

Reference

Finger S., and P. Eling. 2019. *Franz Joseph Gall: Naturalist of the mind, visionary of the brain*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Olivier Walusinski

Independent Researcher, Brou, France

 walusinski@baillement.com  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6927-7946>

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