French-US lab connects biology and social sciences

CNRS president Alain Fuchs and chancellor Gene Block of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) inaugurated a new international joint unit (UMI) called Epigenetics, Data & Politics (EPIDAPO) at UCLA on October 31, 2014. This interdisciplinary laboratory, located within the premises of the UCLA Institute for Society and Genetics, seeks to conduct research in epigenetics and its social and political implications. It will facilitate high-level international synergies among researchers in the life, social and environmental sciences on issues with far-reaching social impact, such as diet, age and gender.

In recent years, epigenetics has emerged as a key discipline for understanding biological processes. Research has shown that certain genetic processes seem to be influenced by human factors like pollution, diet and living conditions. As a result, public policies have gradually been introduced to act on these external factors and reduce their potential effects on populations.

In this context, the international joint unit EPIDAPO has set itself a three-pronged scientific goal. To start with, it aims to create a research area spanning human and social sciences, biology and environmental sciences. Secondly, the development of epigenetics requires the compilation of individual personal data from both private (IMS Health, biobanks, etc.) and public (national healthcare) sources. Social science expertise will be put to use in setting up and operating these databases, and the proliferation of such data in the social space will also be the focus of a study. Thirdly, the EPIDAPO will secure all necessary resources to study new policy proposals that arise from these scientific advances.

Research will encompass a number of issues, including:

**Diet.** The increasing rate of childhood obesity, especially among low-income populations, has become a priority area of research, where interaction between genes and the environment is crucial, with important repercussions on healthcare policies.

**Age.** At the interface of medicine, healthcare and the social sciences, this issue has spawned research on the impact of the environment on biological age markers, the measurement of biological age, healthcare policies, intergenerational dynamics, lifestyles and the image and role of the older generation in society.

**Gender.** The new laboratory will study the relations between the genetics of sexual development (both in its anatomical and behavioral aspects) and the social development of gender in relation to public policies towards sexual minorities.

The UMI EPIDAPO is part of the UCLA Institute for Society and Genetics (ISG), a novel research and training structure at the interface of biology and the social sciences. Pluridisciplinary and geared towards

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1 The study of heritable modifications in genome expression plus non-genetic heritable processes.
society, it contributes to the advancement of knowledge in epigenetics and to the debate on biotechnology and its applications. Its approach integrates the legal, ethical and societal impacts of scientific research.

The EPIDAPO is headed by Éric Vilain, professor of human genetics, pediatrics and urology at UCLA and director of the ISG, seconded by deputy director Emmanuel Didier, a CNRS researcher in sociology. They are assisted by two engineers and will be joined by assigned and PhD researchers.

This epigenetics facility is the seventh CNRS UMI in the US, which is the organization's first partner of excellence in terms of numbers of joint laboratories and international co-publications.

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