Creative Conversations:
On the Circulation of Knowledge

Moderated by Teodora Daniela Sechel*

James A. Secord mentioned that practices of communication, movement and translation are becoming central to specific aspects of the way that the history of science is conceptualized (2004: 656). The aim of this thematic issue is to gain a better understanding of the problematic nature of production and circulation of knowledge and practices within Europe. The journal issue brings case studies that show the complex relationship between the place of production and the process of transfer of knowledge. As Kapil Raj puts it: “the ways localities are constantly constituted within a history of circulation and entanglement between heterogeneous networks of peoples, objects and knowledge practices” is a complex topic of discussion (2010: 517). Consequently, I have invited six historians to a “round table discussion” in order to clarify the recent historiographical developments and understandings of the concept of circulation and/or transfer of knowledge. My ‘guests’ are: Mitchell G. Ash, who teaches history of science at the Institute of History at Vienna University; Thomas H. Broman, professor in the history of medicine at University of Wisconsin-Madison; from Paris, Catherine Jami (CNRS and Université de Paris-Diderot) and Kapil Raj (Centre Alexandre Koyré, EHESS); Antonella Romano, professor of the history of science at the European University Institute in Florence; and Emma C. Spary, who teaches the history of science and medicine at the University of Cambridge.

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What is the interrelationship between medical, scientific, philosophical, and other forms of knowledge?

Antonella Romano

As I am a historian of science, I would argue that the history of science, as an academic field, developed alongside the history of each of the “sciences” as we define them today: inter alia, the history of astronomy, of mathematics, and of medicine. Attempts to question the category of “science” in a historical perspective have allowed the research to shift from these retrospective definitions to a better understanding of what was defined by the actors themselves as “science.” On the other side, the broadening-up of the spectrum of the actors engaged with the making of science has significantly remapped the borders of the knowledge to study (this is the case of alchemy and astrology). The attention paid to these variegated social groups has also outlined the flexibility of practices (shared by different scientific circles, as is the case with experimental protocol) and multiplicity of interests of the same group. For example, the sixteenth-century physicians were equally interested in medicine and antiquaria. Galileo was defined as a mathematician and philosopher and Newton was interested in both natural philosophy and theology.

Thomas Broman

If we are considering the relationship between “scientific” and “medical” knowledge from a historical perspective, then I would say it is quite variable, especially up until the early modern period in history. Knowledge of how the body falls ill and how to treat it is universal, although not every society expresses beliefs about illness in precisely the same language. But only in a few societies have ideas about illness been joined to larger systems of speculation concerning the fundamental composition of the natural world. In the European and Muslim traditions that consider themselves inheritors of ancient Greek medicine and science, there is a long-established practice of letting the natural sciences frame the ways that healers have theorized about health and illness. Even in such locations, however, there continued to be a rich and diverse set of healing practices (some practiced by elite physicians, some not) that were not easily