

**Transgressing Difference: New Approaches to Cultures of Knowledge**

**Veranstalter:** Johannes Feichtinger / Anil Bhatti / Cornelia Hülmbauer, Institut für Kulturwissenschaft und Theatergeschichte, Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften  
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Over the last forty years cultural difference has served as an important heuristic tool of theory and historiography. The scholarly uses of cultural difference dovetailed smoothly with the postcolonial politics of self-empowerment. Recent advances in cultural history and the history of science have begun to question the epistemological and political functions of this paradigm. The history of knowledge, in particular, poses a challenge to the culturalist premises the prioritizing of difference hinges upon. This critical reappraisal lay at the core of the conference hosted by the Institute of the History of Culture and Theatre, a pacesetter in theoretical innovation in the Austrian humanities and a pioneer of public outreach.

PETER BURKE (Cambridge) delivered a splendid paper on exiles and expatriates in the history of knowledge. Following two Austrian émigrés, Edgar Zilsel and Franz Borkenau, Burke showed how artisans shape practices and cosmologies. He also highlighted the émigrés' precarious state of displacement, their intermediary position between two worlds in neither of which they feel entirely at home: Burke's eloquent example was the impact German and Austrian émigrés had on British sociology and art history during the 1930s. While the brain drain effect produced by their outflow led to cultural impoverishment on the continent, it entailed deprovincialization in their host countries. Two arguments can be extracted from Burke's reflections: the contact and cross-pollination between different styles of inquiry evidently presupposes the previous distinctness of these modes; yet Burke's paper also alerts us against over-emphasizing the difference between bold innovators at the 'centres' and their docile apprentices at the 'periph-

eris'. This is an important message for today, when many scholars internalize their ostensible inferiority to some putative Anglo-American standard of academic excellence which they seek to emulate and live up to. Here Burke's remarks chime nicely with the observations of Zygmunt Bauman. When leaving Poland because of the anti-Semitic smear campaigns that set in after March 1968, Bauman found his new academic home, Britain, exceedingly 'provincial', bedevilled by methodological teething troubles Warsaw sociology had gone through long before.<sup>1</sup>

DAGMAR SCHÄFER (Berlin), a historian of Chinese science, presented her work on epistemic objects and emphasized how material orders shaped knowledge production and its vicissitudes. Schäfer first introduced Neo-Confucian philosopher and politician Zhu Xi. In his 1169 *Guidelines of Family Rituals* Zhu saw the placement of ancestral shrines in each individual's home as a key prerequisite for the moral and metaphysical understanding of the order of the universe and its implementation. Schäfer demonstrated how the allocation of ancestral shrines was connected to the management of expectations, prediction and planning. Zhu's approach acted as counterpoise to a penchant for large-scale planning that was generated by the Song empire's geopolitical concerns. Schäfer emphasised the materiality and mediality of knowledge and proposed an ecumenical view of what constitutes knowledge production (the gathering of data, the performance of divination, and the calculation of measurements).

KAPIL RAJ (Paris) gave an engrossing presentation about the fortunes of one botanical-medical text, Garcia de Orta's 1563 *Colóquios dos Simples e Drogas e Cousas Medicinais da Índia*. The Sephardic Portuguese doctor Garcia was prosecuted by the Inquisition and fled to Goa, Portugal's Indian entrepôt, where he compiled his *Colóquios*. Raj not only brought to life Orta's Goa laboratory of knowledge production, meticulously identifying Orta's sources, which ranged from local doctors to Orta's slave, but also reconstructed the *Colóquios* route to Europe. Garcia's multi-

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<sup>1</sup> See Zygmunt Bauman, *What Use is Sociology? Conversations with Michael Hviid Jacobsen and Keith Tester*, Cambridge 2014, pp. 7–8.

lingual material, written in languages that included Marathi, Tamil, and Portuguese, was squeezed into different classificatory schemes during this transmission. Orta's work was amended, abridged and disaggregated by Charles de l'Écluse, Cristóbal Acosta, and Nicolas L'Empereur, each of whom prepared translations or substantially altered versions of the original.

Raj forcefully challenged prejudices about self-contained and retrograde South Asian knowledge. Greek, Latin and Avicennian medicine were known to Orta's Goan interlocutors, but were considered by them to be flawed in many respects. Orta's marginality in Goa enabled him to survive the Inquisition (later his grave would be desecrated, his remains burnt in an *auto-da-fé*), but also to subvert entrenched medical-philosophical authorities that held sway in Europe. Raj's talk showed how pre-existing nomenclatures were locally adapted, for instance in the case of the Biblical repertory of herbs and plants: it acted not so much as a repository of fixed knowledge, but rather as a receptacle filled with local ingredients that differed depending on whether one worked on the shores of the Indian Ocean or of the Atlantic. Raj also admirably sketched issues of pictorial veracity and autopsy; the fabrication of authenticity through the adequate rendering of specimens raised new questions of authority ('native' artists versus 'trained' artists).

MANOLIS PATINIOTIS (Athens) dismantled the centre-periphery dichotomy in the historiography of science. He foregrounded the concept of appropriation, a notion that accounts for 'moving localities' and avoids 'transfer' talk. If we abandon the internalist belief in the intrinsic integrity of Western science that serves to reassert Western dominance over the rest of the world, we can also critically tackle self-orientalising routines among historians of science from the 'peripheries': jumping on the bandwagon of catch-up modernisation, they often describe themselves as agents in the 'uplifting' of previously backward regions, making European integration seem an ineluctable, quasi-predestinational process. Cutting against the grain of these 'common heritage' mythologies, Patiniotis emphasized that, up to the En-

lightenment, Europe itself had been 'peripheral', depending heavily on thriving Asian economies. The very concept of 'European-ness' as a superior civilization owed a lot to modes of self-assertion among elites in extra-European settler colonies. Patiniotis' own superb work explores how local knowledge becomes universal: he describes how Greek Enlighteners aligned Newtonianism (the conception of *vis inertiae* in particular) to their Aristotelian presuppositions.<sup>2</sup> Appropriation captures the phenomena of defamiliarised and refamiliarised knowledge, of knowledge subtracted, transplanted, and re-imported by the expatriates that Burke and Raj study. Yet the notion makes it highly difficult to conceptualise innovation; is appropriation to be understood as the mere re-combination of pre-existing elements? How are we to connect it to other modes of conceptual refurbishment (paradiastole, bricolage)? How are we to account for the roles of tradition and individual agency in the process of appropriation?<sup>3</sup>

JAN SURMAN's (Marburg) content-sensitive approach to scholarly infrastructures drew on his impressive work about the peregrination and relocation of Habsburg university professors across language frontiers.<sup>4</sup> Surman's fresh perspective sees Czech and Hungarian as 'Habsburg' languages of science, whereas Polish, German and Ruthenian were obviously not restricted to the Habsburg lands. Surman briefly sketched what interdisciplinary possibilities this situation entailed in terms of knowledge transfers from universities and adjacent disciplines that had cognate working languages. By looking at the fine 'tissue system' of science beyond nationalist narratives, Surman retrieved a shared sociopolitical Habsburg space of knowledge, a framework of science that retained its importance far beyond the moment when 'national scientific cultures' allegedly became overriding.

<sup>2</sup> Manolis Patiniotis, *Periphery Reassessed: Eugenios Voulgaris Converses with Isaac Newton*, in: *British Journal for the History of Science* 40 (2007), pp. 471–490.

<sup>3</sup> C.f. Franz Leander Fillafer, *Die Aufklärung in der Habsburgermonarchie und ihr Erbe*, in: *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung* 40 (2013), pp. 35–97.

<sup>4</sup> Jan Surman, *Habsburg Universities, 1848–1918. Biography of a Space*, PhD thesis, University of Vienna 2012.

DRAGAN PROLE (Novi Sad) delivered a spirited answer to an old question: 'Can the subaltern speak?' Prole focused on a 'market-shaped historicism' that produces 'true representatives' of exotic cultures; these avatars express themselves in English, the dominant language of the imperial centre, and spoon-feed the centre with conveniently commodified identity snippets of the 'others' surrounding it. This 'historicism' is liberal in that it ostensibly respects the singularity and intrinsic value of all cultures and opinions, as long as they ensure increased sales. Using Vladimir Tasić's work on self-domesticating 'neo-exoticism', Prole depicted these representatives as paragons of post-industrial personal mobility, sacrificing security for the enhanced market performance of their cultural output. Prole's intervention elicited a heated debate about self-censorship and futile difference to the hegemonic metropolis as weak, fetishized prevarication. JAHNAVI PHALKAY (London) cited the history of polycentric English during the last three hundred years, showing how obfuscating it is to associate English with the exertion of 'epistemic violence'. Prole stressed that today many extra-European literatures only become available to readers of smaller European languages through a second-hand world literature based on English translations.

Jahnavi Phalkay drew on post-Second World War Indian nuclear physics, aeronautics, and statistics, giving access to an impressive world of mobile scientists who moved smoothly between the Indian and international fulcrums of technology research. Phalkay dispelled self-victimising clichés of backwardness without dodging the fact that the *grand récit* of the scientific revolution demoted local knowledge to the status of 'myth' and 'superstition'. Yet this does not imply begrudging Indian practitioners their place in big science: science and technology are practices and bodies of knowledge that Indians have engaged with enthusiasm, that they have used to invent themselves 'in their global, national, and individual lives'<sup>5</sup> and to project their visions of world-making onto the planet. The preconditions of 'Western science' are not Western<sup>6</sup>, it is distorting to perceive science as an ideological sign for other

processes of 'modernization' and 'repression'. Yet once science is no longer treated as the bugbear of coloniality, we can reveal that it did not simply conform to intended political imperatives.

The study of the history of knowledge with its situational set-ups, practical tools and spatial configurations is a good foil to the difference paradigm. It transcends 'identity'-inflected categories that remain bound up with questions of language usage and 'meaning'. ANIL BHATTI's (New Delhi) concluding statement threw into sharp relief the dangers of 'culturalization', pointing out that the tendency to culturalize knowledge constitutes a baleful legacy of postcolonialism. Postcolonialism inherited this culturalizing tendency from imperial practices of classification that imposed order on messy colonial reality, yet many scholars remain conceptually constricted by these categories of group consciousness ('groupism', Rogers Brubaker).

In fact two arguments have mutually reinforced each other: the tendency to present indigenous science as an anticipation of Western science on the one hand<sup>7</sup>, and the leftist criticism of omnivorous technology as imperialist social engineering on the other. Both have contributed to establishing a sharp divide between allegedly indigenous and ostensibly 'foreign' knowledge, as well as between native and assimilated subjects. This tendency has led to a distorted view of history, giving the impression that pluricultural ways of life were exclusively reserved for a thin upper crust of Westernized cosmopolitan elites. Yet several of the contributions to the conference showed that this perspective owes much to the strategies of self-enhancement used by post-colonial nation builders around

<sup>5</sup>Jahnavi Phalkay, Introduction [to the Isis focus: Science, History, and Modern India], in: Isis 104 (2013), pp. 330–336, 330.

<sup>6</sup>See Kapil Raj, Relocating Modern Science: Circulation and the Construction of Knowledge in South Asia and Europe, 1650–1900, Basingstoke 2007; Marwa Elshakry, When Science Became Western: Historiographical Reflections, in: Isis 101 (2001), 98–109; Christopher I. Beckwith, Warriors of the Cloisters: The Central Asian Origins of Science in the Medieval World, Princeton 2012.

<sup>7</sup>Compare e.g. Prafulla Chandra Ray, A History of Indian Chemistry from the Earliest Times to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century, 2 vols., Calcutta 1902–1909.

the globe and that it should not colour the categories of historical research. In fact, as the history of India, but also of the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires demonstrate, a life *not* permeated by cultural difference was the rule rather than the exception for the inhabitants of these regions.<sup>8</sup> This is something often ignored by the fashionable study of 'diasporic' actors with their fancy 'networks' and 'flows', their 'mobile' and 'transnational' existence: this current in research all too easily relegates those left behind to some sort of frozen polity, seeing them as imprisoned by national institutions and self-contained cultural systems.<sup>9</sup>

If we avoid projecting clear-cut cultural identities on the past, we can also begin to rediscover the pedigrees of the ethnicising and culturalising intellectual routines that acquired prominence in the 1960s and 1970s. Following Bhatti's shrewd remarks one might argue that ethnicist and culturalist 'othering' as a tool of self-empowerment was inextricably tied to the civilizing promises and imperatives of developmental aid. Subsequent fashions of research into culture contacts and cultural transfers also bear this imprint: the penchant for 'othering' formed the centrepiece of identity politics and it entailed a scholarly emphasis on perceptions of the other (self-images, images of the other). Later, this preoccupation with mutual perceptions gave way to the study of interaction, using the benignly liquid language of 'transfers' and 'negotiations'.

Important as the de-prioritizing of cultural difference is, it raises further questions: difference is the key prerequisite for the idea of democratic representation, its linchpin is the reconciliation of different interests. How can we develop a conceptual tool kit that transgresses differences without eliding specificities or ignoring localities? This question cuts in two directions: what heuristic equipment do we need to account for local distinctions, what does this imply for comparative history? Equally important, if we choose to de-prioritize cultural differences, how can we deal with other differences, be they social, political, or religious?

## Conference Overview:

*Welcome*

Michael Rössner / Johannes Feichtinger / Anil Bhatti (Vienna)

### *Session 1: Knowledge in the Making*

Peter Burke (Cambridge), Exiles and Expatriates in the History of Knowledge

Dagmar Schäfer (Berlin), Planning, Organization and Management: Moments of Decision in Knowledge Making

### *Session 2: Knowledge on the Move*

Kapil Raj (Paris), 'Translating' South Asian Medicinal Knowledge for European Consumption: Three Examples from Southwestern India, 16th-18th Centuries

### *Session 3: Knowledge across Hierarchies*

Manolis Patiniotis (Athens), Beyond Geography: Problematizing Spatial Hierarchies in the History of Science

Jan Surman (Marburg), Culture Beyond Language? The Late Habsburg Monarchy as an (Imperial) Culture of Knowledge

### *Session 4: Knowledge beyond Oppositions*

Johannes Feichtinger / Johann Heiss (Vienna), The Will to Divide. Reassessing Difference as a Tool of Analysis

Dragan Prole (Novi Sad), Culture of Difference and Cultural Differences

### *Session 5: Knowledge as Practice*

Jens Badura (Zurich), Kunst als epistemische Praxis? Überlegungen zum Wissensbegriff im Kontext künstlerischer Forschung

### *Lecture*

Nikita Dhawan (Innsbruck), Decolonizing the Mind: Normative Violence and Epistemic Change

### *Session 6: Knowledge Globalized*

Markus Twellmann (Konstanz), Village Stories: Anthropology and World Literature

<sup>8</sup> Johannes Feichtinger, Gary B. Cohen (eds.), *Understanding Multiculturalism: The Habsburg Central European Experience*, Oxford/New York 2014.

<sup>9</sup> But see Dominique Reill, *Nationalists who Feared the Nation: Adriatic Multi-Nationalism in Habsburg Dalmatia, Trieste, and Venice*, Stanford 2012, pp. 234–235.

Jahnvi Phalkay (London), A Global History of Science?

*Session 7: Knowledge Online*

Simon Gahnal (Vienna), How to Examine Media Experiences: Network Approaches in Media Studies

Daniela Pscheida (Dresden), Digital Scientific Practice in the Context of Changing Cultures of Knowledge

Final Session

Anil Bhatti (New Delhi), Impulse Statement

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