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Editorial

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Editorial

Christian Ersche, Ercüment Çelik, Wiebke Keim, Veronika Wöhrer

1 Introduction

This special issue of *Transcience* contributes to the current debates about the circulation of knowledge in the social sciences. The circulation of practically applicable knowledge, as well as abstract theoretical knowledge; of worldviews, ideologies, and epistemologies, is not at all a new phenomenon. In recent decades several critical studies of such circulation processes have focused especially on the historical as well as the contemporary asymmetry of knowledge transfers. As social sciences were institutionalized during the historically short period of European world domination, it was easy for European scholars to declare non-European forms of knowledge irrelevant. Observing global trends in the social sciences of today, we can therefore find an interestingly ambivalent phenomenon: On the one hand, the European research area and its achievements still enjoy a high standing outside of Europe. On the other hand, the worldwide influence of the European theoretical tradition with its inherent claim to universality is increasingly being perceived as overbearing and presumptuous.

The papers collected in this issue add empirical studies and theoretical reflection to this topic from sociological, historical, and anthropological perspectives. They attempt to assess the acceptance potential of knowledge beyond its relative context of origin and reflect on the preconditions of acceptance or rejection. A closer look at specific empirical examples, however, shows that there are not only different forms of transfer and circulation of knowledge. More generally, this collection shows that there are different types and forms of knowledge which can and should bear relevance for the social sciences themselves. This issue brings together five articles from international scholars who conducted their research as fellows or team members of the research project “Universality and the Acceptance Potential of Social Science Knowledge: On the Circulation of Knowledge between Europe and the Global South”, which is funded by the BMBF (German Federal Ministry of Education and Research) and affiliated with the Institute of Sociology at the University of Freiburg, Germany. The idea for this special issue emerged at a workshop entitled „For a Generational Shift in Analysing Circulating Knowledge“, which was organized in the framework of this project in Freiburg in 2012.¹ The aim of the workshop and, in consequence, of this special issue is to add new perspectives to the study of processes of production and circulation of knowledge.

In his contribution, Cristiano Lanzano problematizes the popular concept of ‘indigenous knowledge’, an issue that connects with academic debates as well as practical development cooperation. In an ethnographic case study on ‘traditional’ environmental practices and sacred sites, which he conducted in the area of the Comoé-Léraba reserve in Western Burkina Faso, he shows the complexity of these practices and places as social and cultural phenomena. Although he acknowledges that the concept of ‘indigenous knowledge’ has been useful for an appreciation of the knowledge of local populations in the global south which has been devalued since colonial times, he also points to the ambiguity that lies in this concept’s tendency to abstract from broader social and cultural aspects and reduce this knowledge to its effectiveness.

Ercüment Çelik explores the circulation of knowledge between academic and extra-academic fields in his paper by focusing on the intellectual engagements with the labour movement in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s. In a case study on the Institute for Industrial Education (IEE) and the South African Labour Bulletin (SALB), Çelik shows the multiple functions and identities of intellectuals and the characteristics of their engagement with the labour movement. After reviewing several theoretical approaches to the role of intellectuals in the labour movement he argues for a complementary understanding of the engagements of different groups of intellectuals with this movement. Instead of focusing

¹This workshop was part of a broader conference on knowledge circulation from which another publication with a related but slightly different focus emanated: ‘Global Knowledge Production in the Social Sciences: Made in Circulation’ (Keim et al. eds.: 2014 forthcoming).

on the social and cultural distance between white intellectuals and black working class, he presents a view that looks for areas where this distance could be bridged.

In her field study with Muslim students of the Malabar Christian College in Kozhikode (Calicut) and their families, Barbara Riedel outlines a specific and locally rooted cosmopolitanism in a region that has been the stage for economic, cultural, and religious interaction for centuries. She shows the crucial role the Mappila Muslims of Kerala played in the cosmopolitan past of this region and the new kind of cosmopolitanism emerging among them. She describes “cosmopolitanism at work” as a process occurring not only in global cities but also in peripheral places and in small scale everyday situations. It is a process that extends far into history. It is neither exclusively modern, nor does it develop along a single timeline, nor is it irreversible.

In his contribution on intellectuals and knowledge production in the 18th Century Salonika, a province of Ottoman Empire, Irfan Kokdas demonstrates how knowledge production goes beyond a simple center-periphery relation and becomes multi-centered. He underlines the importance of rising mobility of intellectuals and multiplication of political channels in the circulation of knowledge in a broad geography. This knowledge production related to the new political debates on the new political administration not only in the Ottoman lands, but also in various parts of Europe where these intellectuals traveled in this century. Kokdas also explains how all of these intellectuals and their production of knowledge developed alongside religious, ethnic and language ties, patronage networks, and land and money ownership. This century also experienced a democratization of knowledge production through the opening up of high culture to a large number of people.

Anika Meckesheimer’s paper deals with two levels of the circulation of knowledge: on the one hand she elaborates on the circulation of knowledge produced and used by activists and academics and on the other hand on the circulation between Mexico and Germany. In her exploration of de-colonial research, she argues for a view beyond academia and beyond Europe for new models: She describes feminist debates in Mexico, where indigenous women refuse to let their words be “taken away” by researchers. In her opinion, it is mostly due to structural obstacles that de-colonial research is so hard to achieve. She concludes that universities and research institutions should rethink their requirements for research (including theses) and offer the structural frameworks that allow for participatory research.

All of these papers draw our attention to knowledge production that is happening beyond today’s supposed academic centers and classical canons in the social sciences. They stress the importance of locality, translatability and social embeddedness of knowledge production. The contributions of activist groups, ethnic or religious minorities, small towns and non-Western merchants or politicians broaden our perspective on what social science knowledge can mean. Furthermore, they make us question the social sciences’ monopoly on the interpretation of society. Especially the connection between academic and non-academic actors in producing knowledge through dialogue and engagements is to be highlighted here. The perception of a variety of actors and locations as ‘valid’ persons and places of knowledge production and the acknowledgment of the various and often entwined paths of circulation of knowledge is on the agenda of all the presented authors. This is their major contribution to our understanding of what sociology on a global perspective might look like.

Reference

- Keim, Wiebke; Çelik, Ercüment; Ersche, Christian; Wöhrer, Veronika (2014): *Global Knowledge Production in the Social Sciences: Made in Circulation*, Farnham: Ashgate.