S-74 – De-centered science, for real?: Transits of mining chemistry, medicine and natural history in Europe and Latin America

The History of Science and Technology and Medicine

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Abstract:
The overall aim of the proposed symposium is to discuss case studies illustrating the transit of chemical, medical and natural history materials and knowledge in order to investigate parallels and differences. More in particular, our emphasis will be on models of exchange and interaction between (former) colonies of European powers and regions of Europe that were outside the colonial orbit. At the same time, we will revise the role the major centers of colonial power played as obligatory points of passage of both materials and the scientific concepts, hypotheses, theories and methods developed based on them.

As it is known, older narratives often made use of top-down models to make sense of global transfers of knowledge, representing exchanges and interactions in the terms of ‘centers’ and ‘peripheries’. Recent scholarship has done much to dismantle these concepts as tools for historical understanding. It has shown how the terminology of centres and peripheries has tended to emphasise colonial, as well as other asymmetrical relationships of power, thus also reinforcing them, and giving them the appearance of being self evident.

As an alternative, many scholars now prefer to discuss what was known as transfers of knowledge in terms of knowledge circulation, leading to a new global history which is, in essence, geographically decentred. But may it be so that the new terminology of circulation sidesteps, rather than solves the old problem of explaining how centres of power project influence over – and command the attention of – less influential places of knowledge production?

History of science has not yet paid sufficient attention to the problems posed by the investigation of the exchanges between European (near) peripheries and colonial (distant) peripheries. Our point of departure is a general field of knowledge that was highly relevant for countries like Brazil and Sweden, i.e. ‘distant’ and ‘near’ peripheries starting in the 18th century: chemistry, medicine and natural history. In particular, we will study the analysis and classification of specimens gathered from mineral-, plant-, animal-, and human sources. We are interested in the scientific actors’ search for the applications of substances derived from such specimens, as well as in the build-up of institutions and systems of knowledge proceeding from the handling of specimens.
Keywords: Mining chemistry – Natural history – Medicine – Transit of knowledge – Center versus periphery.

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