

Cortona Week 2017

## Concepts on the Move

Concepts are more than terms with a fixed meaning, even though they may often be misunderstood as such. They are generalizing abstractions, which group and condensate ideas, views, visions, agendas or working models. They represent maps and are not the territory, they are menus and not the meal, and they may open opportunities for comparing and clarifying notes across the borders of particular disciplines. Concepts are alive, dynamic, fixed only temporarily, advancing, in motion – on the move. Negotiating concepts needs a certain amount of flexibility and tolerance for ambiguity, further clarifications and critical evaluations, to develop new agendas for the advancement of scientific and artistic research.

In former times scientific pioneers like Alexander von Humboldt or Charles Darwin ventured arduous expeditions into unknown territories before they laid out concepts like “cosmos” or “evolution”. Today we have international conferences, interdisciplinary working groups or open access internet for the modification of concepts and their continuous exchange across academic disciplines, cultures and societies: *globalization, identity, history, change, networks, information, facts, objectivity, emergence, subject, agency, cognition, narrative, gender, visualization, time*, to name just few.

Here are two specific examples for such concepts on the move:

As early as in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of stress in material and mechanical sciences began its journey through historical epochs, cultural settings and academic disciplines. In 1973 the originator of the modern concept of stress in physiology, Hans Selye, wrote: “Everybody knows what *stress* is and nobody knows what it is. The word *stress*, like success, failure, or happiness, means different things to different people and, except for a few specialized scientists, no one has really tried to define it, although it has become part of our daily vocabulary.” Today stress shows up in various faces, meanings and operationalizations, as a psychophysiological concept in health care, as a social science concept, as environmental stress or as a financial concept for “stress-tests” of banks. In a recent review of the concept of stress (Haller et al. 2014), the authors concluded that “few other contemporary terms are so unprecise and nevertheless so quickly

understood”. Even as particular meanings of stress are defined within the context of particular disciplines, there seems to be considerable common, transdisciplinary denominator.

Another example is the concept of *hybridity*, which shows that transdisciplinary agreement is not always unambiguous. Hybridity was first set up as a concept in biology, contrasting *purity* in living organisms. Hybridity was seen as the weaker and more vulnerable variation of evolving organisms. Later, the concept of purity became politically used in an imperial fashion, even with racist connotations. In its contemporary usage in science it denotes an idealized state of diversity, or a concept of energy preservation in novel types of propulsion engines. But the concept of hybridity also infiltrated the humanities and the arts where it has become a powerful concept within the last decades: for example to explain intercultural identities (hybrid subjects) or to describe and analyze new combinations of artefacts as performing lectures, video essays or video installations.

Depending on the specific context in which concepts are used, applied and transformed, they are attached to limited, often tacit, sometimes even incompatible, taken-for-granted disciplinary interpretations. Inter- and transdisciplinary discourse helps to open up and articulate fruitful discussions about the commonalities and discrepancies of such interpretations across their areas of application.

The Cortona Week 2017, sponsored by ETH and ZHDK Zürich, picks up and encourages the challenging debate about such concepts on the move. It will provide a high-quality, transdisciplinary forum with renowned experts and scholars representing science and engineering, humanities and the arts. As in many Cortona Weeks before, the ultimate goal is to achieve engaged dialogue with graduate students and doctoral candidates from leading European universities.