

How tacit is tacit knowledge ? Or : Looking for sources to approach tacit knowledge
Karine Chemla

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This talk was conceived in conversation with the book by Harry Collins, *Tacit and explicit knowledge*, The University of Chicago Press, 2010. In particular, I followed him in discussing tacit knowledge in relation to, or in contrast with, explicit knowledge. When Harry Collins lists the disciplines that in his view have « take[n] tacit knowledge to be part of their concern », he recurrently does not include history in his list. My question was thus to understand whether this was contingent or whether there was a deeper problem there. In my view, the main problem historians face with the issue of tacit knowledge is a methodological one, related to sources. Whether one considers tacit knowledge with respect to the practice or with respect to the subject matter —two facets that need to be addressed separately and in relation to each other—, sources are a thorny issue. In a first part of the talk, I indicated how some reasonings by historians depend on assumptions regarding tacit knowledge that are not made explicit and that require justification.

On the one hand, historians have to resist the temptation to derive, from the fact that we have no sources, the conclusion that we are dealing with tacit knowledge. To avoid this problem, one may be tempted to adopt the following strategy: concentrate on one given text and examine what is left tacit in the writing of the text. This could theoretically be done for two types of tacit knowledge: the knowledge that actors choose to keep tacit as opposed to that which is explicit in a given text (local level: to keep knowledge tacit at this level may derive from different types of motivations: making a text clear, establishing social distinction, ...); the knowledge that is never made explicit, except incidentally, as a collective phenomenon (global level, linked to the professional culture in which one operates). However, to approach tacit knowledge in this way, by focusing on ‘a text’ requires determining what a text is, its extension, and this operation proves to be quite a tricky issue, as I explained by a choice of examples. As a result, the corpus of knowledge deemed tacit may be rather unstable, depending on the focus the historian chooses and the decisions taken with respect to what constitutes a text.

On the other hand, historians have to resist to refer to knowledge as tacit in the absence of any information on the oral dimensions that went along the use of the documents that are their sources. In other words, the act of communication needs to be taken into account fully in order to determine which knowledge may be deemed tacit in a given context. To avoid the difficulties attached to this question in relation to ancient history, the example given to illustrate this problem is a proof in Samuel’s *Introduction à la théorie algébrique des nombres* (second edition, 1971). The same inscription, it is argued, does not make knowledge tacit, or rely on tacit knowledge, in the same way, whether it is inserted in the page of a book or written at the blackboard in relation to oral discourse. The pair oral/written must thus be considered in relation to the pair tacit/explicit, even though the relationship between the two is far from obvious and the documents on the oral dimensions of a given practice are difficult to find.

All these problems, I suggest, derive from the fact that in the first part of the talk, “tacit” was mainly a historian’s category. I thus turn, in my second part, to a case study in which we can observe “tacit knowledge” as an actor’s category. I do so by commenting the article by Lei Hsiang-Lin, “How Did Chinese Medicine Become Experiential? The Political Epistemology of *Jingyan*”, *Positions*, 10:2 (2002), pp. 333-364. This article recounts struggles between practitioners of Chinese medicine and Western-style physicians in China in the 1910s and 1920s. It brings to light how the tacit knowledge attached to the practice of Chinese medicine became the topic of an explicit discourse in the context of these struggles, although it had never been considered before. Moreover, the article shows how actors attached this dimension to the mode of transmission of Chinese medicine, learning for an important lapse of time from a master. This remark designates the types of modes of transmission in a given context as an indicator of the amount and nature of tacit knowledge transmitted. More importantly, the case study shows that one can take the discourses about tacit and explicit in a historical perspective and wonder what are the motivations that lead to important changes in these discourses, similar to the changes discussed above. Lei Hsiang-Lin brings to light how actors from both sides correlated the value attached to a practice of science that made things explicit with knowledge coming from the “West”. This fact highlights that these values tacit/explicit were and still are loaded politically for the actors. The remark suggests that it would be highly interesting to examine the history of the use of the values of tacit and explicit in the history of the historiography of mathematics since the 19th century and the political dimensions attached to this use, and this, until today!

In conclusion, probably the circumstances in which different professional cultures are brought in contact with each other are quite favorable for the production of sources in which knowledge tacit in each of them are made more explicit.