

*A network of dissident physicians in the confessional age.
Research perspectives and methodological challenges*

My subject is the relationship between early modern medicine and the spread of religious dissent in 16th-century Italy. I aim to reconstruct and historically understand the nature of a network of dissident physicians who faced religious repression and opposed dogmatic confessional boundaries.

These sixteenth-century physicians were part of a European community of humanists, who corresponded about knowledge and discoveries and travelled between confessional zones. Italian physicians were also involved in other forms of networking, especially at an underground level. When a heretical group arose, I have found that there was often a physician leading it. Physicians exchanged and smuggled prohibited books, they dealt with heretical propaganda, they explained the meaning of the Scriptures to less learned members of heretical cliques, and in some cases they published works in defence of religious peace, exploiting their international connections. In so doing, these oddly central figures contributed to the growth of what I call a “medical network of dissent”, whose reconstruction has never been attempted.

Highlighting the contexts, practices, and patterns of connection relating to humanistic heretical physicians, from a social and intellectual perspective, is crucial in advancing our knowledge of intertwined scientific and religious kinships in the early modern age. In my project, the understanding of historical networks is sustained by visualisation through DH tools, which have illustrative and heuristic value, as well as close reading of the sources. My network analyses are based on a database of 210 cases of Italian heretical physicians collected from archival research on Inquisition trial records. These have extensive information on who the members of the heretical cliques were, where they used to gather, what kind of activity they carried out together, etc.

Mine is an ongoing project. With my paper, I want to highlight how the choice of dealing with SNA has helped me to re-formulate my research question, pushing me to combine social and intellectual approaches, to include micro-historical perspectives in my research, and to explore different Archive sources. Religious beliefs and practices can be useful to delineate a dissenting minority of outsiders from the hegemonic Catholic religious community. However, SNA shows how helpful it is to take into consideration the whole spectrum of heretical physicians' biographies, social relationships and social/ professional status.

Historians of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation have implicitly relied on the concept of networks in order to examine heretical biographies of important figures. However, they have

generally been sceptical about adopting network analysis theory and tools.¹ Especially within European historiography, this scepticism has been reinforced by a preference for the history of ideas, which has produced crucial studies, but has never really put major Reformation-era changes, like abrupt confessionalization and humanistic medicine, into context. Thanks to social network analysis research, instead, I investigate connections that characterized, shaped and sustained religious dissenters, identifying links between everyday life and major historical transformations.²

¹ See for instances the works on important figures in the Italian Reformation that scholars like Aldo Stella, Massimo Firpo, Adriano Prosperi, or Luca Addante have published.

² This change of perspective has been inspired by, among others, the works of Simone Testa and Vivienne Larminie, who have tried to combine early modern religious and intellectual history with a networked approach. However, unlike these studies, I aim to produce some actual visualisation of the networks of heretical physicians. Testa, S., *The Italian academies and their networks. 1525-1700: From Local to Global* (Palgrave MacMillan: New York, 2015); Larminie, V., *Huguenot Networks, 1560-1780. The Interactions and Impact of a Protestant Minority in Europe* (New York - Oxon: Routledge, 2018). Useful have also been: Lemercier, C., "Formal network methods in history: why and how?" in *Social Networks, Political Institutions, and Rural Societies*, ed. G. Fertig. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015) pp.281-310; Brughmans T., Collar A., Coward F. (eds.), *The Connected Past: Challenges to Network Studies in Archaeology and History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).