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When Practices, Places and Materiality Matter: A French Trajectory in the History of Knowledge

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In recent years, issues raised by the new knowledge and information society have become a staple of both bookshop shelves and university research programs. History and the social sciences have taken up the challenge and now offer a vast range of approaches and problematizations that overflow the narrow confines of the history and sociology of science.[1] The creation of the American journal *KNOW* in 2017 and the *Journal for the History of Knowledge* in the Netherlands in 2019 has added to a process of institutionalization that began nearly twenty years ago with the publication of two iconic books. The first, *Ways of Knowing* (2000) by the medical historian and professor at the University of Manchester John Pickstone, sought to build a transdisciplinary history in which the histories of science, technology, and medicine converge, while the second, *A Social History of Knowledge* by cultural historian Peter Burke, professor at the University of Cambridge, gave new impetus to the historical sociology of knowledge.[2] France was not to be outdone: the launch in 2007 of the *Revue d'anthropologie des connaissances* edited by Dominique Vinck was followed by the publication in 2007 and 2011 of the two weighty multi-authored volumes of *Lieux de savoir* edited by Christian Jacob. These publications adopted an interdisciplinary approach that challenged the growing dominance of the cognitive sciences and neuroscience and their claim to offer an alternative to the constructivism of the social sciences.[3] A focus on places of knowledge, social interaction, and cognitive practices located in near or distant contexts over the long term makes it possible to combat any *naturalization* in the analysis of the processes of knowledge production. This article seeks to revisit issues in the trajectory taken by the history of knowledge in France, showing the effects of imports from the English-speaking world and also particularities linked to the grounding of the history of social science in the two central concepts of practice and place. At once pragmatic and spatial, the history of knowledge in France is now set to enable historians to reappropriate the cognitivist turn of the early 2000s.

Knowledge Beyond Science: Challenging French Epistemology

This decompartmentalization did not simply seek to break down the great distinction between science and knowledge or between *épistémè* and *technè*, but also challenged the often anachronistic idea of two distinct cultures, with the natural sciences on one side and the arts and humanities on the other.

Having long remained on the fringes of history, philosophy, and history of science, the history of knowledge led the way to a historiographical renewal of the history of science in France. In the decades immediately following the Second World War, the history of knowledge had been shaped largely by its relationship to philosophy and idealism when it was not driven by scientists themselves. But it gradually acquired its own identity and became professionalized. From Gaston Bachelard to Michel Foucault by way of Alexandre Koyré and Canguilhem, French epistemology questioned the single definition of science as an autonomous system of knowledge, comparing it with other regimes of scientificity and rationality

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[1] Van Damme, "What (good) is cultural history?"
[2] Pickstone, *Ways of Knowing*; Burke, *Social History*.
[3] De Fornel, *Naturalisme versus constructivisme?*

regarded as ordinary or inferior.[4] In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault shifted the emphasis from the history of ideas to discourse analysis, exploring the tensions between science and knowledge, repoliticizing the operations of knowledge and linking them to institutions.[5] In the same period, sociological theories were influenced by Karl Manheim's *Sociology of Knowledge*, posthumously published in 1952 and deeply rooted in a social study of knowledge,[6] leading to the historical sociology of intellectuals developed in France by Pierre Bourdieu during the mid-1960s.[7] In the 1980s, the history of knowledge became receptive to ideas from the French social history of science, the British sociology of scientific knowledge, and Anglo-American "science studies" and, in doing so, silenced a tenacious prejudice which regarded knowledge in its default state as rationality without content or technique or as pre-rationality in an evolutionist perspective based on universal hierarchies. In France, the history of knowledge had long been approached through the social history of intellectuals or savants in the work of Jean-Pierre Vernant and Jacques Le Goff, Daniel Roche, and then Christophe Charle.[8] The pioneering studies they produced sought to contextualize social habits and to regard the production of knowledge as a practice, an "activity of thought" (*activité de pensée*) that was often supported by institutions and required the development of a historical sociology of savant practices.

In the last three decades in France, the history of intellectuals has diversified, giving rise to a plurality of approaches. Several of these have overflowed the narrow bed of the traditional history of science, reformulating their agendas to exclude the field's former monopolies and divisions. To cite only a few research programs,[9] we can mention: the social history of savant practices (François Waquet[10]), drawing on the history of books, reading, communication, and information (Roger Chartier[11]) and cultural history more generally; the historical anthropology of knowledge (Christian Jacob, Alain Boureau[12]); the social and cultural history of science (Dominique Pestre[13]); the material history of science (Karine Chemla, Françoise Waquet, Marie-Noëlle Bourguer[14]); the history of scientific abstraction (Éric Brian[15]); the history of intellectual work (Dinah Ribard, Étienne Anheim[16]); the history of the circulation of knowledge and go-betweens (Kapil Raj[17]); the connected history of knowledge (Antonella Romano[18]); the historical sociology of configurations of knowledge (Jean-Louis Fabiani[19]); the anthropology of knowledge (Dominique Vinck, Nicolas Adell[20]); and the intellectual history of technologies (Liliane Hilaire-Pérez).[21] The discipline has also benefitted from being grounded in history rather than exclusively in science or philosophy.

Decompartmentalizing Knowledge: The Practical Turn of the 2000s

While it shows great diversity, we are bound to observe that the history of knowledge in France has not managed to impose a commonly accepted definition. Not having the coherence of a field in the Bourdieusian sense or that of an established discipline, the history of knowledge benefits from its capacity to operate across different established disciplines, identifying common practices beyond the particularity of each domain.[22] Its strength has been to open up entirely new research directions at points of intersection between disciplines. In France, this has meant that the history of knowledge is no longer the history of a specific domain, but a way of reading societies in every period that makes it possible to connect and interrogate science, literature, the arts, and the humanities within a whole. The aim is to show how, within each social activity, more or less formalized and legitimate processes of shaping knowledge are in play and, conversely, how activities of knowledge and creativity are not simply leisure pursuits for the educated but can be understood as work

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[4] Bitbol and Gayon, *Épistémologie française.*

[5] Lamy, *Politique des savoirs*; Bert and Lamy, *Michel Foucault.*

[6] Mannheim, S*ociology of Knowledge.*

[7] Bourdieu, "Champ intellectuel," *Raisons pratiques*, *Science et réflexivité.*

[8] Le Goff and Köpeczi, *Intellectuels français*; Roche, "Intellectuel au travail," *Humeurs vagabondes*; Charle, *Naissance des "intellectuels."*

[9] Romano, "Fabriquer l'histoire."

[10] Waquet, *Parler comme un livre, Histoire émotionnelle du savoir.*

[11] Chartier, *Cardenio.*

[12] Boureau, *Empire du livre.*

[13] Pestre, "Histoire sociale et culturelle"; Pestre, *Histoire des sciences.*

[14] Chemla, "Sciences et matérialité"; Waquet, *Ordre matériel du savoir*; Bourguet, *Monde dans un carnet.*

[15] Brian, "Calepin."

[16] Ribard, "Travail intellectuel"; Anheim and Piron, "Travail intellectuel."

[17] Raj, "Intermédiation et intermédiaires," "Go-Betweens."

[18] Romano, Brice, and Gaudin, "L'Europe moderne"; Romano, "Sciences et des savoirs."

[19] Fabiani, "Disputes, polémiques et controverses," *Philosophe français?*

[20] Vinck, *Sciences et société*; Adell, *Anthropologie des savoirs.*

[21] Hilaire-Pérez, *Pièce et le geste*, "Commencements pour la technologie?"

[22] Nagel, *Knowledge*; Besnier, *Théories de la connaissance*; Boutier, Passeron, and Revel, *Qu'est-ce qu'une discipline?*

and specific socio-cognitive operations. In the foreword to his overview of 2011, *Anthropologie des savoirs*, the anthropologist Nicolas Adell did not hide the difficulties of this undertaking:

> "this immediately throws into question the very legitimacy of a project such as the 'anthropology of knowledge,' which may seem to lack stable foundations for two related reasons: on the one hand, the imprecise nature of the term 'knowledge' [reinforced in French by the use of the plural] makes it an elusive object and its anthropology delicate. On the other, 'knowledge' can be extended to mean something present in every aspect of social and cultural life, at which level the anthropology of knowledge becomes synonymous with cultural anthropology in general."[23]

Relying on strong debates in the history of science and sciences studies but also in the history of humanities, the history of knowledge could re-address classical topics like disciplines, institutions, and practices by putting the stress on the making process.[24]

This lack of definition has been a strength, facilitating mobility across disciplinary borders. Starting from the mathematical culture taught in Jesuit colleges, Antonella Romano developed a research field on missionary knowledge and updated the classical interrogation of science and religion, blurring distinctions that had been too stark.[25] In another example, the history of administrative or social knowledge emerged as a very important element of the French approach, fueling ideas at the intersection of expertise, science, and the politico-administrative sphere and leading to an understanding of the state as a major promoter of savant practices. In this sense, the emergence of political economy is a textbook case for the study of the invention of social knowledge. Published over twenty years ago in 1992, Jean-Claude Perrot's major work *L'histoire intellectuelle de l'économie politique* sets out the broad lines of a strong historiographic program defining the paths by which historians can approach past forms of economic knowledge. In the course of sixteen chapters written 1971–1992, Perrot undertakes an archaeology of a branch of knowledge that had yet to be unified, using his landmark method centered on the "concrete history of economic abstraction."[26] Breaking with both ideological visions of political economy and the disciplinary genealogies beloved of economists, he showed how it is possible to analyze the emergence of a domain of thought before it gains autonomy. Based on theoretical practices, intellectual tools, regimes of validation, and publication strategies, Perrot reveals the ambivalent scientificity of political economy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the underlying tension between the ambition of a pure economics detached from contingency and the social body and the development of a quasi-science of government based on predictive practices. Perrot's work profoundly modified representations of political economy by tackling directly the theoretical representation of a form of social knowledge in which science and practical expertise combine. The importance of bringing the contributions of the history of science into the history of the state was emphasized by Marie-Noëlle Bourguet with her investigations of prefectures and by Isabelle Laboulais in relation to mining engineers.[27] Laboulais clearly showed how the library that preserved studies by the engineers of the École des Mines in Paris was a place where their action-based knowledge was amassed. The Paris archives of the Maison des Mines became a vital storehouse for the data gathered on the ground by mining engineers during their tours, missions, and investigations and also facilitated their administrative uses through tools such as files, registers, maps, and atlases.[28] Here we can clearly see how scientific activities combine with state planning.

Through this emphasis on materiality, places, practices, and tools, which was also central to the work of the historian of ancient Greece Christian Jacob, the French history of knowledge broke down the usual demarcations and enabled new forms of circulation and appropriation, following actors in their way of categorizing the intellectual world.[29] Paying serious attention to the *prosaic* dimension of knowledge through the notion of intellectual work seems to us to be a good way of describing one direction of current research while trying to make links with older theoretical traditions.[30] By focusing our thinking on practice, situations, places, incorporated logics, and collective processes of shaping knowledge and recognition, we have to observe that the ideas of Peter Burke, Dominique Vinck, and Christian Jacob on practices have

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[23] Adell, *Anthropologie des savoirs*, 3.

[24] Among various examples, we can mention some influential works: Latour, *Making of Law*; Grafton, *Footnotes*; and Grafton and Siraisi, *Natural Particulars*.

[25] Romano, *Contre-Réforme mathématique*.

[26] Perrot, *Histoire intellectuelle*.

[27] Bourguet, *Déchiffrer la France*.

[28] Laboulais, *Maison des mines*.

[29] Jacob, *Lieu de savoir?*, *Des mondes lettrés*.

[30] Van Damme, *Prose des savoirs*.

evolved.[31] In their more recent work, they present cognitive activity as "knowledge [that] is defined not as something that is possessed but as part of what people do and are."[32] Epistemic practices are no longer defined and categorized *a priori* based on their content of ideas, but as activities, distributed processes, and located "operations" of knowledge (*opérations de savoirs*) that do not necessarily reflect the social position of an individual or group. Debates on post-humanism have proposed to separate practices from human actors in order to make visible the work of infrastructure and things that organize knowledge (such as robots, computers, papers, archives, and libraries).[33] But, as Christian Licoppe has noted, in the French debate the notion of practice remains ambiguous, relating at once to critical sociology, ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism, and *science studies*.[34] Consequently, intellectuals are not approached solely as political actors or as a fringe of the social elite but as individuals at work.[35] As Jacob writes, knowledge can be studied in terms of "fields of activity and experiment, involving actors, practices and material and immaterial objects," and to that extent the aim is not to analyze content and social roles but to render "operations" intelligible: "knowledge seems to us inseparable from a set of generative processes that we might describe as skills."[36] Central to the anthropology of knowledge is the notion of operations, which we find in the sociology of science and also in the works of jurist Yan Thomas, a historian of Roman law interested in the techniques invented to connect people to things and to measure the structural gap between facts and law. Thomas sees the jurist as a legal artisan who produces concepts that relate to practical action and contribute to the artificialization of the world.[37]

Placing Knowledge: From an Ecological to a Global Perspective

A second operation sought to bring together the history of science, the social sciences, and the humanities. Places in themselves were left behind with the growing importance of a more ecological perspective. In the second volume of *Lieux de savoir*, published in 2011, Jacob extended his exploration to cover practices, operations, and the transition from knowledge to practice.[38] He proposed a shift of focus:

> "we have opted for a large-scale cartography, which, beneath the major regional divisions already explored, will reveal the finer web formed by a multitude of places of new knowledge. We shall look at the worktables and benches of artisans, at computer screens and the pages of books, the paper that is written or drawn on and the status of these inscriptions, their lines and signs. Central to this project, in tandem with intellectual operations, are hand movements, vocal techniques, and graphic skills."[39]

Jacob proposes three points of reference for understanding this approach. Firstly, he rejects a purely ideational or immaterial definition of knowledge. Secondly, there is an association with the social sciences: "So we have chosen to locate knowledge at the heart of today's social science, enriching it with the many explorations of cultural history, sociology and anthropology."[40] The entire volume is centered on the notion of "practice," drawing on the four theoretical frameworks of Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Bruno Latour in *Science in Action*, and the ethnography of practices and skills (routines, body and movement, rituals etc.). The place given to physical skills is key: "this second volume of *Lieux de savoir* seeks to shed light on the physical, bodily skills used in both manual and intellectual work."[41] More profoundly, and this is the third point, Jacob locates his historical anthropology of savant practices on the edges of the history of science:

> "It can be tempting to locate the beginning of the history of science at the moment when knowledge became separate from skills and was abstracted from actions to enter the realm of number and mental representation. There is, however, a great risk of objectifying knowledge as a set of concepts, theorems, and general, abstract propositions, independent of actors and the society that

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[31] Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, and Von Savigny, *Practical Turn*.
[32] Gherardi, "Practice," 168.
[33] Gherardi, "Practice," 172. On infrastructures of knowledge, see Bowker et al., "Toward Information Infrastructure Studies."
[34] Licoppe, "'Carré de l'activité'".
[35] Vinck, *Sciences et société*.
[36] The quotations are from Jacob, *Lieux de savoir*, vol. 2, 15; and Müller, "Lieux de savoir."
[37] Thomas, *Opérations du droit*. Hermitte and Napoli, 13.
[38] Jacob, *Lieux de savoir*, vol. 2.
[39] Ibid., 14.
[40] Ibid., 16.
[41] Ibid., 21.

produces it and, along the way, privileging the particular models of science and knowledge of western modernity."[42]

Here we see a deliberate distancing from the history and philosophy of science and from the idea of modern science. Jacob adopts a material turn based on skills:

> "far from an anecdotal aside, they are a means for an understanding of historicization, since they determine forms, contents and effects."[43] One extreme of this investigation into the operations of thought considers the naturalization of the investigations of the cognitive sciences: "The cognitive sciences propose to shed light on the neurological mechanisms that regulate perception, language, forms of logical thought and the structuring of a number of functions—such as memory, the construction of space, abstraction and imagination—at a deep, generic level, based on recent developments in the investigation of the brain and visualization and the measurement of its forms and sites of activity. Our investigation stops where this new research field begins. We are not seeking to shed light on the functioning of the human mind or to reveal universal patterns of thought. What we are exploring is the shaping of thought in historical and cultural situations, in the projections that give it existence, in actions and skills, artifacts, speeches, writings and inscriptions."[44]

Jacob's approach is to analyze ecologies that are located and historical, whereas the approach of the cognitive sciences is more essentialist and pays little attention to the conditions in which schemas are acquired and incorporated. Jacob's perspective is at once long term (starting with antiquity) and global (including non-European cultural areas and sciences of erudition such as philology). It sets out a new legitimacy for the history of knowledge, shifting the sociological, Western framework put in place by Peter Burke, whose project remains centered on the history of knowledge based on books and communication. Both of these parallel enterprises reflect a desire to develop a set of questions and also to draw up an inventory of objects and practices. This spatial turn was also born of a dialogue with geographers and historians of geographical knowledge such as Jean-Marc Besse.[45] Besse seeks to move from the level of tools of (epistemological) knowledge to the emic level, in other words, the spatial experience of actors. Hence, the rediscovery of the work of the geographer Éric Dardel who was influenced by Heidegger and advocates a phenomenological approach to space. Besse seeks to systematize ideas on the regimes of historicity proposed by François Hartog, foregrounding geographicity, a notion that first appeared in the work of the French geographer Pierre Michotte in 1921.[46] This transnational dimension of knowledge is reflected in the spatial history of empires, which aims not only to rethink cartographic tools for understanding the production of imperial territories but also to grasp negotiations and interactions with local geographies and to better understand the field sciences. Exploring vernacular cartographies, Hélène Blais and Isabelle Surun show that before 1880, explorations in West Africa were not carried out in conquered countries but involved intense discussion with the African authorities.[47] The ideas of "interspatiality" and "cospatiality" emerge from this spatial history of empires: the image of a contact zone where the "spatial representations, practices and uses of different individuals and groups coexist and, sometimes, interact."[48]

   The comparison of different savant spaces and cultures and different literary and scientific disciplines underpins the fertility of the historical sociology of knowledge as a research field seeking to free itself from specialized objects of study. In the approach promoted by Jacob, the historical anthropology of knowledge starts with places and practices in order to show how savants "do science or knowledge." Instead of starting with the sociology of knowers and their practices, Jacob's project is thus rooted in a desire to adopt a comparative approach in which historians of science, orientalists, philologists, and classicists rub shoulders with sociologists and anthropologists of science. In this wake, French historians of knowledge in the last decade tried to problematize a possible global history of knowledge which consists of promoting mobility and circulation as a way of decentering the Western narrative but not in a linear way, encouraging a micro-global approach of encounters.[49]

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[42] Ibid., 21.
[43] Ibid., 21.
[44] Ibid., 25.
[45] Besse, "Lieu en histoire," "Approches spatiales."
[46] Besse, "Remarques sur la géographicité."
[47] Blais, *Mirages de la carte*; Surun, *Dévoiler l'Afrique?*
[48] Blais, Deprest, and Singaravélou, *Territoires impériaux*, 13.
[49] Two salient examples: Romano, *Impressions de Chine*; and Bertrand, *Histoire à parts égales.*

On the tenth anniversary of the launch of the *Revue d'anthropologie des connaissances*, its editor Dominique Vinck observed: "All disciplines are included but, increasingly, within groups that cross the old internal and external borders of the sciences, expertise, the arts and crafts, practical and technological skills and others that are ignored. It seems that knowledge has never been so central to every aspect of the life of societies and the planet. And yet it still seems that most of our disciplines pay it little attention."[50] As we reach our journey's end, we might ask ourselves whether this observation still holds true. On the contrary, the multiplicity of studies seems to me to reflect the proliferation of methodological ideas on the practices of historians.[51] We hope that this brief overview has shed light on a French tradition of the history of knowledge strongly rooted in the social sciences that has been extensively renewed around the intense dialogue with the anthropology of knowledge.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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[50] Vinck, "Repenser la connaissance," 103.

[51] Feuerhahn, Mandressi, and Romano, "Contextualiser."

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