FORUM

Beyond a Singular History of Knowledge

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In 1882 Edwin Lewis delivered a graduation speech on "Science, Knowledge, Wisdom." An instructor of chemistry at the interdenominational Protestant "mission school" in Beirut (later renamed the American University of Beirut), the moral of his speech was straightforward enough: through the collection of facts—or knowledge—a systematic study of things, or science, could be established; wisdom, however, was knowledge of a different, higher or supernal order. In this respect it could be seen as a typical missionary translation project, turning *'ilm* (the broadest word in Arabic for "knowledge") into "science"—a distinct epistemological order that involved both the gathering of the knowledge (*ma'arifa*) of things and the construction of causal theories: "Science searches in nature for the causes of events and places them in their correct context." *Hikma*—or wisdom—was set aside all together, essentially as knowledge of the divine: as Lewis wrote, "no telescope will show us God, no microscope will show us the soul of man, and no chemistry will disclose the secrets of life."[1]

One might assume that this categorization of knowledge, science, and wisdom was orthodox enough by the standards of Lewis' community. Unfortunately, his example of the transformation of knowledge into science was clearly not. For it was none other than Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection that Lewis referred to as the prime model of a studious, accurate collection of facts turned into a causal theory of nature or "science." Senior missionary instructors (and eventually New England board members) objected vociferously to the mention of Darwin. Amidst a growing bonanza of press debates and student protests, Lewis was eventually dismissed.

The "Lewis Affair," as the incident came to be known, has since served as a well-known and much discussed anecdote of Arabic debates on evolution in the late nineteenth century. Indeed, there is much about the incident that is striking, if not paradoxical. It was thanks to American missionaries, after all, that the first press storm around Darwin's theory of evolution broke out in Arabic. Ironically, they belonged to the very same group of men and women who for decades prior had been proselytizing the modern sciences as an antidote to religious superstition, dogmatism, and irrationality. Yet the lecture—translated into and delivered in Arabic—was perhaps even more striking in terms of its very subject: namely the distinctions between knowledge (*ma'arifa*), science (*'ilm*), and wisdom (*hikma*).

The creative transformation of the Arabic words used to translate each was indeed strikingly novel. As "knowledge," *ma'arifa* was denuded of its gnostic implications and given a more empiricist twist: knowledge, Lewis repeatedly emphasized, came through the systematic collection of facts. All knowledge was therefore propositional. In the vast corpus of classical and post classical Arabic discussions of *ma'arifa*, this criterion did not apply; ideas of "gnosis" across multiple language traditions could scarcely be thought to follow either. Placed within its classical lexicon, moreover, *'ilm* had an equally complex genealogy that referred primarily to the knowledge of "definite things," a broad categorization that encompassed both revealed and acquired knowledge and could thus be variously equated with the knower or the known, with comprehending and obtaining, perception and apperception, or intuition and even believing. But Lewis glossed over all that in order to similarly redefine *'ilm* as "science."

Putting aside lexicographical nuances and traditions of classification over multiple languages and disparate places and times, the key message Lewis wanted to impart to his students was the idea that science was a

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[1] Lewis, "Science, Knowledge, Wisdom," 158–67.

singular enterprise, one that was marked by its own unique forms of verification and explanation. Getting this definition right was precisely what separated "positive" (or "true") knowledge (like "true" or reasoned belief) from irrationality (or superstition).

Positivism was, of course, a nineteenth century dogma, and its influence on the classification of knowledge was as influential in its time as it was for centuries after. For Comte as for others of his generation, what separated a positive science from theological or metaphysical ones was a shared commitment to nothing short of the reorganization of society along rational grounds. "To sum up the matter: the theological and metaphysical philosophies are now disputing with each other the task of reorganizing society. … The positive philosophy has, up to the present, intervened in the contest only in order to criticize both schools; and it has accomplished this task so well as to discredit them entirely," wrote Comte in his *Cours de philosophie positive*. "We must complete the vast intellectual operation commenced by Bacon, Descartes and Galileo," he urged, "by furnishing the positive philosophy with the system of general ideas that is destined to prevail henceforth, and for an indefinite future, among the human race."[2]

For Comte, positivism was itself nothing short of a blueprint for a revolutionary future. His classification of the "science of social phaenomena," or Sociology, as the highest order of positive sciences was similarly organized around a teleology of the progress of humanity. Hence, one could witness archaic, ancient, or primitive theological modes of political power as the deduction of all political principles from the divine. Or more moderately advanced, metaphysical ones through their deduction from abstractions. Perhaps unsurprisingly, English liberal thinkers like Herbert Spencer and John Stuart Mill later claimed utilitarian ethics and liberal politics as the highest stage of social organization given their pure basis in a positive (rational and experiential) philosophy.[3]

As Comte's own description of a "positive philosophy" betrays, what is often at stake is the very working of "society" and the social norms, standards, and modalities used to interrogate or explain the world. Ever since Bacon, it has become something of a truism to point out that knowledge is power. Any epistemic concept or practice must, at heart, also therefore be an expression of the modalities of power and the social order of the time. After all, from the nineteenth century onwards, it was precisely these positive or empiricist definitions of "science" that were increasingly translated on a global scale, even as their translations in various vernaculars often built on older epistemic categories and, indeed, terms. Nor is it difficult to explain why such a global discourse around this particular view of knowledge should have emerged at this time, particularly as a host of new ideas and practices of these natural sciences came at the heels of the expansion of imperial and military as much as technical might on a similarly global scale.

By the time Lewis delivered his speech, the idea that *'ilm* could be separated from other forms of knowledge production that were theological or metaphysical in nature could only be delivered in Arabic via an elision through translation. In essence, Lewis needed to actively forget or to render meaningless what the actual distinctions in Arabic were for generations prior. Hiding a novel rendering in vernacular terms was, in this sense, the familiar ruse behind all translations. Yet Lewis himself was situated in a very particular set of discourses around "truth-telling," and it is easy enough to parse out what attendant forms of power and belief shaped his ideas here. More broadly, attending to how such discourses about "true" knowledge, "true" science, or "true" wisdom travel or move through translation, therefore, can do much to enhance our understanding of the complex social norms and forms of knowledge/power that render them utterable or conceivable to particular peoples at particular times.

We've come a long way from the ideas and ideals of nineteenth-century positivists of course. When asking now "What is the history of science?"—or "What is the history of knowledge?"—it seems we can only answer the question with reference to a vast corpus of concepts, processes, and problems. Peter Burke's *What is the History of Knowledge*? reminds us of exactly this: "Despite the title of this study," he writes, "it might be argued that there is no history of knowledge. There are only histories, in the plural, of knowledges, also in the plural."[4] So how —or indeed why—organize a study of knowledge (or knowledges) around its history (or histories)? Divided into brief sections on knowledges and their histories, Burke is keen to acknowledge the multiplicity of various epistemic traditions and their criteria for knowledge.

As Burke also points out, the history of science comes closest to providing a template for what such meta-epistemological inquiries might look like, for historians of science make visible and concrete the "variations and conflicts" between ideas and practices of knowledge over time and across space. Yet the history of the

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[2] Comte, *Fundamental Principles*, 40.

[3] See Spencer, "Classification," *Principles*; Mill, *Comte*; Harp, *Positivist Republic*.

[4] Burke, *History of Knowledge?*, 7.

history of science has been equally bedeviled by the search for singularity. As a discipline, the history of science itself took shape as part of the early to mid-twentieth century liberal internationalists' quest for a universal history of humanity—or what George Sarton famously penned the "new humanism." And while the rise of constructivism and relativism may have since broken apart the ambition to construct a singular or universal narrative for the history of science, the specter of universalism can still be found to haunt many contemporary studies in the history of science till today.[5]

Much could be said for the history of the history of "knowledge" itself. Think of the categories of so many studies in historical epistemology to the present: knowledge, evidence, objectivity, reason, rationality, and even truth may seem timeless enough. Yet, as Ian Hacking reminds us, when paired with their opposites—intuition, imagination, prejudice, doubt, madness, or myth—we begin to see how truly local or contingent they actually are. This vast nexus of knowledge/power reminds us, therefore, that all ideas, like objects, have a particular situated trajectory or historical ontology.[6]

It is not surprising therefore that among Burke's list of epistemic virtues—such as objectivity, observation, quantification, verification, and comparison—and forms of knowledge production—such as expeditions and storing and preserving information—we find a familiar set of situated modes or forms of knowledge. The dual rise of empiricism and positivism has, it seems, clearly outrun alternative or archaic traditions of knowledge. The professionalization of disciplines and the rise of academies has of course further consolidated this process which, by the twentieth century, had indeed become global.

Burke's encyclopedic coverage is impressive. Yet we may rightly wonder if there are other forms of knowledge production and epistemic virtues that we might attend to still. Take one example of a category of knowledge that was completely removed from a positivist schema: metaphysics. Comte's bid for singularity—or his attempt to relegate relative forms of knowledge in accordance to a singular progressive scale—was predicated on a divorce of metaphysics from science as a matter of relative epistemic virtue. Any form of knowledge production or any truth claims that rested beyond our experiential understanding of phenomena were simply presented as the fossils of contemporary thought or relegated a "lower" status on the scale of the progression of human thought. Even in his own time, Comte's excommunication of metaphysics was severely criticized. After all, one could argue that all abstract notions, say of time and space, are at root metaphysical conceptions, or to use Comtean language, they are not descriptions of phenomena per se but meta-physical categories we refer to in order to render other phenomena relatable and therefore observable. Abstractions—like phenomena—are themselves relevant it seems.

So what happens if we take metaphysics or other forms of "occulted materialities" even more seriously?[7] How might this affect our understanding of how we consider histories of knowledges in their own right? Take the example of Ibn Khaldun. Attending to the text and its translations, we see once again how the translation of ideas has similarly been utilized to reconstruct contemporary epistemic virtues. His fourteenth-century *Muqaddima* was popularized across a variety of languages well into the nineteenth century (and after), precisely because it seemed to offer a concise historical description of categories of knowledge in Arabic. Indeed, his "science of society" even led a number of European Orientalists and Arab Arabists to promote him as the first "sociologist" in history. Yet there is much in Ibn Khaldun's own classification of knowledge or science (he typically used the term *'ilm*) which escapes the parameters of a more typically modernist description of the positive sciences. His discussion of the science of angels, prophecy, and divination, for instance, could hardly be said to count among the new disciplines of knowledge then categorized as "sciences." When attending to the many late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century commentaries and annotations to the text, however, we find scant reference to these categories and why Ibn Khaldun counted them among the more "advanced" categories of knowledge. Like so many modern histories of Bacon that neglect his occult interests or Galileo and his astrological treatises, we moderns have similarly forgotten about Ibn Khaldun's angels and *jinn*.

What happens, then, if we take vernacular classifications of knowledge more seriously in their own right and re-read their histories on their own terms? How might we consider these other forms of knowledge? And the social order and knowledge/power nexus in their time that gave rise to them as "truths"? Attending to categories of knowledge in translation—alongside the occulted materialities they represent and the metaphysical and metatextual landscape they inhabit—provides the basic context for exploring their vernacular meanings at the very least. Taken a little further, it might even uncover the socio-political contexts behind them. But there may be other possible, if still unexplored, routes to these.

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[5] I have addressed this issue in more detail in Elshakry, "When Science Became Western."

[6] Hacking, *Historical Ontology*, chapter 1.

[7] Mukharji, "Occulted Materialities."

So what might a plural history of knowledge look like today—or better yet, in the future? The difficulty of narrating multidisciplinary and cross-linguistic *histories* of *knowledges* remains a challenge, but an exciting one. Covering a range of contexts, places, and peoples, we need to continue to ask more seriously what forms of knowing might populate our future histories of the world. What happens when we attend to global or multi-linguistic traditions of thought or knowledge to uncover the vast criteria they rested upon? Or when we attend more carefully to the ways in which they travel across other languages, places, or times? Or consider the vast range of social orders and modalities of power they represent? This is not the task for a single author, of course, so it is precisely through such a *Journal of the History of Knowledge* that we may hopefully begin to ponder and plot these varied histories and possible futures together.

Competing Interests
The author has no competing interests to declare.

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