
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Early Modern Echo Chambers. Material Improvement, Social Inequality, and the Restricted Circulation of Knowledge in Pre-Industrial Bavaria

Verena Lehmbrock

University of Erfurt, DE
verena.lehmbrock@gmail.com

Drawing on the concept of chambered knowledge, this article focuses on the problem of non-circulation of knowledge across social groups in pre-industrial Europe. By following one of the few peasant practitioners whose knowledge transcended the barriers of peasant society, this article not only sheds light on the worldview of an especially loud and proud individual, but also seeks to analyze the conditions that prevented or allowed knowledge to jump from his native knowledge chamber to those of the local elites and the wider literary public. As the mystery of Michael Irlbeck can be partly revealed by examining the economic and socio-political pre-conditions of his agency, this article makes a more general claim for the relevance of social structures and categories in the history of knowledge.

Keywords: chambered knowledge; social inequality; (non)-circulation of knowledge; rural society; agricultural Enlightenment; subaltern knowledge

Some of the excitement surrounding the concept of circulation has been replaced by a warning against "liberal" dreams about knowledge circulating across all geographical and social boundaries. As Philipp Sarasin and Andreas Kilcher have stressed, circulation can exist only within and between systems of restriction.¹ The present article, on the one hand, acknowledges the many merits of the circulation paradigm, particularly its significance as an alternative to Eurocentric diffusion models of knowledge.² On the other hand, it turns to the problem when rash assumptions of unfettered circulation are likely to create blind spots. Narrowing the focus to seemingly non-political knowledge practices, can, for instance, let the wider context of social structures disappear from view.³ Neither practices nor meanings, however, are dissociated from social structures, such as demography, gender, economy, or colonialism. Indeed, almost any early modern German text, regardless of genre, refers to social hierarchies, thereby reflecting the estate-based social order. In this sense, the text at hand subsumes the criticism of notions of unrestricted circulation under the more general criticism that, in the wake of the cultural and praxeological turns, fundamental social categories such as class have at times been lost.⁴ It is precisely those social categories that are at risk by an unreflective use of concepts such as "circulation" or "trading" of knowledge.

¹ Sarasin and Kilcher, "Editorial." The excitement has been described by Secord, "Knowledge in Transit." For a recent summary see Östling, "Circulation, Arenas." See also the radical critique of the history of knowledge as a dinghy of neoliberalism: Hirschi, "Wissensgeschichte."

² See, for instance, Schaffer et al., *Brokered World* and Raj, "Beyond Postcolonialism."

³ Felten makes a similar point by emphasizing that processes of hybridization presuppose previous separation, Felten, "Science and Bureaucratic Knowledge."

⁴ On frictional loss during transitions from structural to cultural concerns, cf. Sewell Jr., "Political Unconscious."

Taking up the concept of chambered knowledge (*gekammertes Wissen*) introduced by Regina Dauser, Lothar Schilling, and Peter Fassl, this article highlights those aspects that stood in the way of successful knowledge flows across the social strata in pre-industrial Germany. Knowledge remained socially chambered right up until the mid-nineteenth century to the same significant extent that knowledge appropriation was structured by such social factors as class and legal status as well as ideas of honor or habitus.⁵ What is more, education was unevenly distributed, with general literacy rates varying widely by class and territory. With regards to the subject of the present case study, peasant farmer Michael Irlbeck (1786–1869), compulsory education had not yet been introduced during the time of his childhood and youth. His agency was situated in the monarchy of Bavaria during the 1830s, in a period between the wars of liberation against Napoleon (1813–1815) and the first democratic revolution in the German territories in 1848–1849. An author of technical books on agriculture, Irlbeck was thus an “obligatory amateur” and autodidact, not having had a real choice between peasant or “enlightened” society.⁶ As far as agriculture was concerned, he felt he had something to say, and he said it forcefully. We are dealing here with pre-industrial agriculture that was powered by solar, human, and animal energy. Harvesting machinery powered by fossil fuels did not exist, and neither did mineral fertilization, which later contributed significantly to the increase to today’s astronomical yields. The spectrum of soil productivity in the eighteenth century ranged from three harvested grains per sown seed, which is considered the minimum to sustain human life, to twelve harvested grains in countries around the North Sea.⁷

Certainly, educated elites of the eighteenth century not only considered agriculture the lowliest of all mechanical arts, but they also considered peasant mentality to be the most pressing obstacle to agricultural improvement.⁸ There was considerable social distance between the rural population on the one hand and gentlemen farmers, bureaucrats, or scholars on the other. Members of the educated classes used to rather correspond about the common people than with them.⁹ Accordingly, elitist knowledge and common rural knowledge differed in terms of content, practice, and in the ways in which they were acquired and transmitted.

For the purpose of this article, it is precisely the social status of agriculture that renders it a useful comparative context in which to review the conceptual vocabulary surrounding knowledge circulation. The existing case studies on artisanal-scholarly encounters have mostly focused on high-ranking individuals representing prestigious arts and crafts that contemporaries already singled out as requiring a special “presence of mind” and the “use of the intellect.”¹⁰ Agriculture, by contrast, was a far more common technical field that involved at least two-thirds of the European population, thus representing a large segment of the early modern world of labor. Irlbeck’s case allows us to assess processes of intergroup contact from a standpoint of the peasantry. A distinct category of society, the peasantry interestingly formed the social elite in the villages, while at the same time representing the bogeymen in educated debates on agriculture.¹¹ The sheer fact of Irlbeck’s accomplished publication was tantamount to a transgression of his native chamber of knowledge, and the conditions of his authorship are indeed a mystery, because, according to what we know, this Bavarian peasant was a notable exception.¹² However, this exception continues a tradition of exceptions of the eighteenth century, which saw, for instance, the peasant astronomer Johann Georg Pahlitzsch (1723–1788), the poet and agricultural author Isaac Maus (1748–1833) and Swiss diarist Ulrich Bräker (1735–1798), as well as the Zürich rural subaltern Jacob Gujer (1718–1785), who, according to

⁵ Dauser et al., *Wissenszirkulation, Industrialisierung*, 8–9.

⁶ Ogilvie, “Obligatory amateurs.”

⁷ Prass, *Grundzüge der Agrargeschichte*, 95.

⁸ Lehmbrock, *Der denkende Landwirt*, 96–99, 105–9. The eighteenth century saw increasing numbers of noble and bourgeois agrarian entrepreneurs, however, a stigma remained attached to the actual back-breaking agricultural labor. Accordingly, von Eckart in his *Experimental Oeconomie* had diagnosed as an epistemic problem that inventions in agriculture required mostly sour and hard work. For that reason, inventions could not be realized by scholars or statesmen, but only by “sturdy country folk” and “persons of intermediate social standing.” See von Eckhart, *Experimental Oeconomie*, 2.

⁹ Lehmbrock, *Der denkende Landwirt*, 258–59. See also Shapin and Barnes, “Head and Hand.”

¹⁰ “Kunst,” 95. The art of agriculture remains only rarely touched upon in current scholarship. See, for example, Valleriani, *Structures of Practical Knowledge* covering architecture, mining, brewing, glassmaking, cartography, and ballistics, among others.

¹¹ On the ordinary peasant as a symbol of non-knowledge in agricultural improvement discourse, see Lehmbrock, *Der denkende Landwirt*, 90–109, 258–59. On the agricultural or economic Enlightenment, see Popplow, “Economizing Agricultural Resources”; Jones, *Agricultural Enlightenment*.

¹² Only one comparable German-speaking author is known at all for the same period, the peasant farmer Leonhard K. Inderbitzin from Central Switzerland, see Siegert, “Enlightenment 19th Century,” XCVII. It is thanks to Reinhart Siegert that I became aware of Michael Irlbeck.

Denise Phillips' recent interpretation, became a "celebrity" in the European Republic of Letters.¹³ Peasant writing was not entirely uncommon, but when peasants put pen to paper, it was usually to write poems, autobiographies, or diaries, which were rarely addressed to a wider public.¹⁴ Irlbeck, by contrast, wrote a three-volume magnum opus on his profession, entitled *Das Wichtigste der dermaligen Landwirtschaft* (The Most Important Aspects of Today's Agriculture, henceforth: *Today's Agriculture*), published in 1834, and two other books: one on flax cultivation and the other on the *Zeitgeist* of agriculture, published in 1836 and 1838, respectively. His personality, knowledge, and literacy eventually allowed him to become a late participant in the widespread agronomic reform movement that had been unfolding throughout Europe since the second half of the eighteenth century among wealthy landowners, state officials, scholars, clergymen, and other members of the so-called educated classes.¹⁵ Before returning to questions regarding how and why Irlbeck took up the pen and went public, thereby leaving a mark in the knowledge chamber of the educated elites of his region, this article begins with some information about his life and his farm.

The Historical Irlbeck

Until recently, historians knew the Bavarian peasant farmer only through his books; and therefore, some uncertainty remained about whether or not he might be an invented persona. However, thanks to the work of two local researchers of the areas of Kötzing and Rimbach, this article can present new archival evidence pertaining to Irlbeck's birth in 1786 in Liebenstein, near Kötzing.¹⁶ This was in the Bavarian Forest area, about twenty kilometers from the Czech border, then known as the Kingdom of Bohemia. His parents directed an estate (*Hofbauerngut*), which formed part of a noble family's properties. Michael took over the farm in 1808, when he married Eva Müller in Liebenstein.¹⁷ A so-called *Wohnstallhaus*, Irlbeck's house was one of the largest homes in the villages of the Bavarian forest area, combining a dwelling and stables under one roof and including a double balcony on one of the gable sides (Fig. 1). According to the tax measurement system for farms of the time—the *Hoffuß*, literally the "foot of the farm"—Irlbeck's was considered a half-farm (*halber Hof*). He cultivated at least ten hectares of land with draft cattle and hired day laborers.

As for Liebenstein, the historical atlas of Bavaria records a total of nine estates in the year 1755. Three estates were classified as half-farms in fiscal terms, two were the size of a quarter-farm, and the remaining four the size of an eighth-farm, with their inhabitants being called *Söldner*. These residents did not earn their living from agriculture but rather from day labor, a handicraft, or a tavern.¹⁸ Not recorded are the maids and farmhands working for wages, or the countless poor who did farm work in exchange for room and board as so-called *Inleute*, or, in the worst case, lived as gangs of robbers in the woods.¹⁹ As a *Halbbauer*, Irlbeck thus belonged to his village's social elite, which allowed him to temporarily hold the position of village headman. For about three centuries before 1829, the citizens of Liebenstein had been subalterns of the local noble family Nothafft von Wernberg, until the Bavarian state bought the properties of the now-impooverished family and thus became landlord to Irlbeck and his fellow villagers.²⁰ In 1839, the Irlbecks had their home signed over to their only daughter, Franziska, and her spouse. Eva died in 1847 at the age of fifty-six, and Irlbeck retired to Metten close to Deggendorf, about fifty kilometers away, where he spent the last years of his life until his death in 1869.²¹

As a farmer, Irlbeck was a pioneer and a conservative at the same time. For a while, he tested seven-field as well as four-field rotations, but ultimately returned to a three-field system. His highly elevated

¹³ Phillips, "Socrates on the Farm." For literature on the mentioned peasant authors and more, see Lehmbrock, *Der denkende Landwirt*, 81. Biographies of German speaking lower class authors can be found in Böning et al., *Selbstlesen-Selbstdenken-Selbstschreiben*.

¹⁴ Peasant diary sources are compiled in Peters, *Mit Pflug und Gänsekiel*. On account books and diaries see also Lorenzen-Schmidt, *Writing peasants*.

¹⁵ On the German educated classes see Bödeker, "Die gebildeten Stände."

¹⁶ See research results from Pongratz and Silberbauer on Pongratz' blog, Pongratz, "Kötztlinger Geschichte(n)."

¹⁷ PfARI, Matrikelbücher (Heiratsregister), Band 6, Nr. 156; StALa, Landgericht ä.O. Kötzing, Briefprotokolle 1838/39, Nr. 965, unpag.

¹⁸ Additionally, the atlas lists a small house maintained by all neighbors for the local shepherd family. Piendl, *Das Landgericht Kötzing*, 33. Also see the explanatory notes of Pongratz in "Kötztlinger Geschichte(n)."

¹⁹ The landless poor were only rarely allowed to marry. According to Pongratz, communities were allowed to expel women (towards Bohemia) when they had their third illegitimate child, conversation with Pongratz on 25 March 25, 2021.

²⁰ At this point the jurisdiction for Liebenstein fell to the district court in Kötzing. *Das Landgericht Kötzing*, 33.

²¹ Eva's death is recorded in BiZARE, Matrikelbuch Rimbach Nr. 8, 85. Irlbeck's late place of residence can be identified via the foundations and donations he initiated from there.

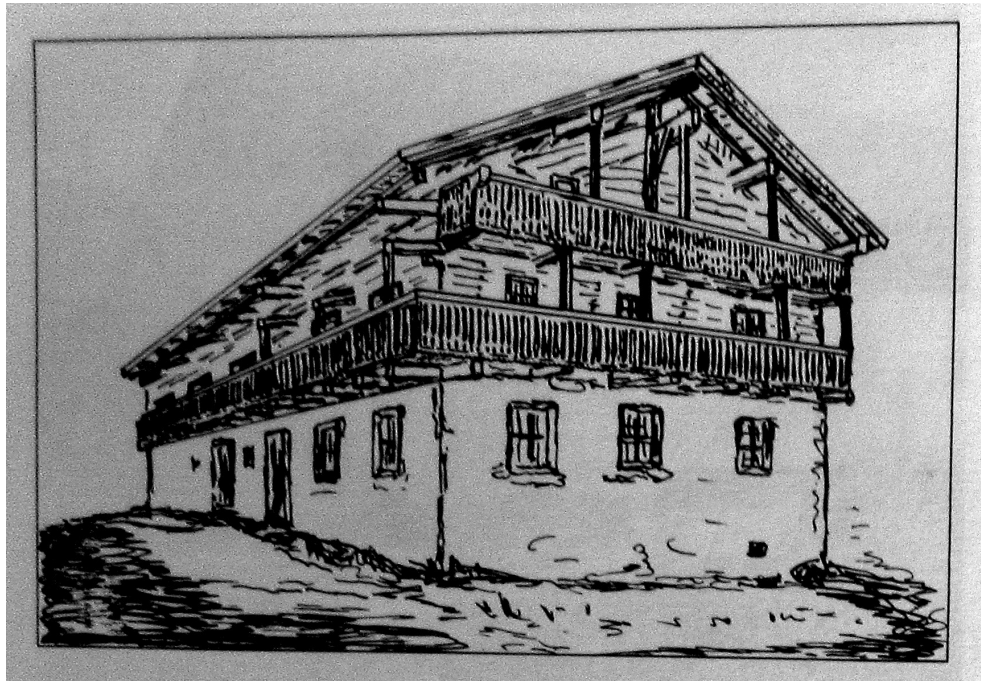


Figure 1: Drawing of Irlbeck's house which was moved to the farming museum in Tittling in 1985 in: Merz, *Museumsdorf*, 40.

piece of land is reported to have been cool and rocky, with a clayey, sandy soil low in humus and not particularly fertile, yielding four times the seed only in a good year. And yet, Irlbeck was able to achieve remarkable economic success as a result of his intensive work and numerous meliorations. He spent as many as twenty-three summers with the sole focus of cultivating barren land, during which he ripped out trees and bushes, dug up 2,000 cartloads of stones, levelled hills, planted rows of fruit trees to border the edges of his fields, drained swamps, and created artificially irrigated meadows on dry mountain slopes. It seems that no corner of his property remained untransformed in the years of his activities, and the local agrarian society, the *Landwirtschaftlicher Verein* [henceforth: *Verein*], honored him for his many accomplishments.²²

A Subaltern's Rage

In researching Michael Irlbeck as an author of knowledge claims, a basic question to consider is why he wrote. We can infer his motives from his main work *Today's Agriculture*. On the one hand, Irlbeck criticized the movement of *Volksaufklärung*, the German-language phenomenon of the educated classes attempting to "enlighten" the rural population on economics and other topics by means of persuasive literature, which occurred from the 1750s to the middle of the nineteenth century.²³ On the other hand, his work expressed a will for political participation, an aspect I discuss in more detail below, and which sets Irlbeck apart from most eighteenth-century peasant figures and authors.²⁴ Among Irlbeck's extensive agricultural experiences, those with clover cultivation and summer stable feeding stand out in particular. Indeed, the public debates on clover, stable feeding, and the associated dissolution of the commons apparently ignited Irlbeck's sharp criticism, sending him into such a furor that one may consider the clover issue a source of his literary ambitions. He was, at times, driven by rage which, if nothing else, gave him the motivation and stamina to spend his winter evenings on the complex task of writing. As seen later in this article, it is precisely the polemical passages of Irlbeck's work that allow for the analysis of processes of circulation and non-circulation as well as the social and epistemic chambering of knowledge.

²² Irlbeck, *Landwirtschaft*, vol. 1, X, XV; vol. 2, 2–5, 49–55, 90–97. An in-depth account of the Bavarian agricultural society is provided in Harrecker, *Landwirtschaftlicher Verein*.

²³ Siegert, "Enlightenment 19th Century." See also Böning and Siegert, *Volksaufklärung*. The project database with more than 27,000 titles is even more comprehensive than the three published volumes; online access is being planned.

²⁴ Gujer, for instance, was portrayed as a "perfect subaltern," content with his position in society. See Phillips, "Socrates on the Farm," 161.

In his three volumes, Irlbeck retrospectively criticized the “Agricultural Enlightenment” of the eighteenth century, a term that he uses verbatim. He even went so far as to claim that the “blinding spirit of the times” as propagated by agricultural writers had brought on a much greater degree of misery and poverty than had “ten” wars against France, his criticisms being particularly directed at the propagation of new field systems.²⁵ Indeed, what contemporaries called the *agromania* of the eighteenth century had seen a veritable wave of publications regarding new practices and crop rotations that were promised to be superior to the time-proven three-field system. According to Irlbeck, it was specifically the recommendation to grow red clover, based on the so-called English or Schubart system (named after the agricultural entrepreneur Johann Christian Schubart), which had also been advocated by the princely states, that had inspired thousands of young people:

We shall grow clover! Keep splendid cattle! This will yield fertilizer aplenty! Crops in abundance! Money will be plentiful!!—Even more clover! Even more cattle! Even more crops! Even more money!!—Oh Lord!—’Tis stupendous! [*Ist das wahr!!*]—A dream!!²⁶

Irlbeck himself had been one of these young people. Immediately after taking over his parents’ farm in 1808, he planted mostly clover as fodder plant on the fallow fields, sold half the livestock, and kept the rest of the animals in the barn. But unexpectedly, the clover grew only two inches, thus merely returning the seed—and drawing the ridicule of his neighbors. Four oxen ate the whole green fodder without getting fat. The hungry animals roared with “high-pitched voices demanding freedom.”²⁷ Irlbeck was left with little straw, only a small quantity of low-quality fertilizer, and the clover fields became covered in weeds. Despite all this, he sowed clover again the following year. In the second winter he was barely able to feed the livestock and had to sell even more animals before the third winter came around.²⁸ Finally, he tried one last time with a heavy fertilization of his clover fields, depriving his grain fields of manure. This brought him to the brink of financial ruin, at which point he released the livestock to roam free again to graze on the stubble fields, the “measly” clover fields, and the mountains and the woodlands. It subsequently took him a full ten years to attain the same number of livestock that his father had kept.²⁹ Why, wondered Irlbeck, is the cultivation of clover still being advocated by all publications even though on his soil it grew only with the most intensive fertilization, if at all? “Where has one erred?!—Hark! For I am speaking from experience!”³⁰

As an agricultural pioneer, Irlbeck showed a pronounced interest in the progression of agronomical practices, and certainly never questioned that improvements were necessary. Instead, he was preoccupied with the qualitative question of *how* these could be achieved. The elitist “enlightened” knowledge, on which he had relied in his desire to pursue reform, had failed. The knowledge given in the literature had dashed his expectations and betrayed his earlier trust, as it had failed to address the question of soil quality, and had also barely touched upon the financial implications. Based on this experience, Irlbeck came up with his own improvement suggestion, this time concerning “the business of authorship,” by suggesting that governments should ascertain that each agricultural publication is examined prior to its release as part of an “agricultural examination” process.³¹

In his text, Irlbeck repeatedly states that his experience was representative of the rural society in which he lived, with “thousands” having failed as he had, and many of his fellow farmers having been ruined. As he pointed out, after a twenty-year period of failed experiments undertaken by peasant farmers in all surrounding villages, the good intentions of elite educated writers had turned them into an object of mockery, ridiculed for their “scholarly ignorance.”³² While Isaak Maus, one of Irlbeck’s eighteenth-century predecessors, had formulated an external critique of agricultural reforms, namely from the standpoint of a peasant subsistence economy, Irlbeck appears as reform-minded himself, enthusiastic about technological innovation and yield increase, utilizing the vocabulary of a profit-oriented economy.³³ He did so, however,

²⁵ Irlbeck, *Landwirthschaft*, vol. 2, 75. See, for more details, Lehmbrock, *Der denkende Landwirt*, 72–83. For an interpretation of the peasant’s polemic as a general critique of the agricultural Enlightenment see Lehmbrock, “Peasant Eyes.”

²⁶ Irlbeck, *Landwirthschaft*, vol. 2, 74–84.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 77.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 78.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 79.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 80.

³¹ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 84.

³² *Ibid.*, vol. 1, VI; vol. 2, 76.

³³ On Maus see Mahlerwein, *Die Herren im Dorf*, 242; Siegert, “Isaak Maus.”

without stigmatizing as backwards the conventional forms of fallow land and pasture farming. On the contrary, Irlbeck asserted that the experiences of village farmers in regions with poor soil and natural fertilizer shortages made them “all too aware” of pastures being intractable. After all, he argued, any other method, such as cumbersome fertilization, costs twice as much as the “value” returned by fallow land and pasture. According to Irlbeck, everybody knew that fallow pasture was “pure profit.” If fallow land is cultivated, the product must “already in advance compensate for the relative damage of winter planting, deterioration of the fallow field, as well as one’s own expenses.”³⁴ This passage provides an example of how deftly Irlbeck utilized modern economic terminology for the purpose of defending tried and trusted methods.

Improvement, the catchword of agrarian reformers in the second half of the eighteenth century, likewise stands out as a *leitmotif* in all three of his volumes. Irlbeck’s narrative reads like a report on how the suggestions for improvement, that had been circulating for decades among the educated classes’ knowledge chamber of agricultural improvement, had been tested and found wanting. Drawing on his twenty-eight years of experience in implementing improvements, Irlbeck especially parodied the attitude of the proponents of *Volksaufklärung*:

The peasant shall be forced! By force he shall be made to obey! He must keep his cattle in the barn! Cultivate all his uncultivated land! Build new, more beautiful villages! Unless forced to, he will not move a single foot! The native must be instructed about culture by foreigners, otherwise he would eternally keep sticking to his old rut, as he has seen it in his grandfather! The country is underpopulated!³⁵

Irlbeck painted a negative image of *Volksaufklärung*, whose representatives, although outwardly motivated by philanthropy, were attempting primarily to rehabilitate their own failed existence through their agricultural writings, according to Irlbeck:

We always see [...] such great scholars, and at times the most illustrious men on whom emperors and kings bestow distinctions and rewards [like Johann Christian Schubart who was raised into the imperial nobility with the title “noble of the clover field” by Joseph II] as they pass through the countryside like trade sample riders after their estates have become impoverished and subjected to forced sale, swarming hither and thither in the villages as they seek to make a living not unlike mountebanks and quack doctors, peddling the products of their mind or orders on subscriptions, preferring advance payment, and putting on airs of being great men by whatever means conceivable!³⁶

As Irlbeck noted, none of these individuals had ever successfully made a living from agriculture or managed a farm under the conditions of peasant economy. Consequently, he rejected as absurd not only their written advice, but also the notion that peasant farmers should be instructed in schools by men who usually only appeared as “unhelpful observers” of the rural population.³⁷ Moreover, Irlbeck revealed that some of the practices that improvers urged the peasantry to adopt were not new or unfamiliar to them. For example, there was no need for the Bavarian peasant to be told about stable feeding, given the fact that it had been practiced “from time out of mind” depending on the supply of fodder.³⁸ Ultimately, Irlbeck was prepared to accept as “authorized experts” neither gentlemen farmers nor scholars, but only experienced agricultural producers; landowners who lived exclusively off agriculture.³⁹

The Publication

It seems worthwhile to reflect on the various presuppositions underlying the special case of Irlbeck, that is, his economy as well as his authorship, on the basis of the available, albeit still limited, information. His work

³⁴ Irlbeck, *Landwirtschaft*, vol. 2, 72.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 75.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, IX.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, V; vol. 2, 75.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, IX.

³⁹ Irlbeck refused to include “tradespersons, brewers, and manorial lords” on the grounds that, even as they often owned large farms, they “knew little about running them,” see *ibid.*, vol. 1, XII.

was published under the auspices of the Bavarian *Landwirtschaftlicher Verein*, an institution that in the early 1830s was still entirely in the tradition of the patriotic and economic societies of the Enlightenment.⁴⁰ With a membership roster comprised of civil servants of the royal court as well as of noble and academic circles, the *Verein* could not (or did not wish to) overcome its distance from the simple rural population.⁴¹ Clearly, Irlbeck did not belong to the *Verein's* socio-political and cultural universe. This, however, did not prevent him from sending the manuscript of his book to the *Verein* for review, in the hope that this would allow the book to be printed by the famous Augsburg publishing house, Kollmann. In fact, the *Verein* and the public institutions it created eventually became the central precondition for Irlbeck's book's publication—and for his emergence into history.

At first, the *Verein's* members did not believe in the author's peasant origin, which is, considering the rarity of peasant authorship, not entirely surprising. Thinking that the manuscript was the work of a country priest, the *Verein's* mistake can be interpreted as a manifestation of the concept of chambered knowledge: a common peasant at that time simply could not be expected to present his knowledge in the form of a manuscript. It was only when Irlbeck went in person to the *Verein's* headquarters, which had been located on Türkenstraße in Munich since 1824, that his request was taken seriously.⁴² He had taken care to bring a letter of recommendation signed by a local authority figure, the district judge of Kötzing.

Irlbeck's book was addressed to state officials as well as to farmers and, as he proclaimed, was the first and hitherto "only one of its kind," which referred to the quality and depth of his knowledge on the one hand, and to his social status on the other.⁴³ Unlike other lower class naturalists such as Anne Secord's artisan botanists, Irlbeck did not assume the role of invisible assistant contributing to a savant's network.⁴⁴ He even accentuated class difference by stressing that he was neither a wealthy landlord nor a scholarly agricultural improver, and he had no university education. As a matter of fact, Irlbeck had worked as a farm hand before taking over his parents' farm, and his ability to write in a scholarly manner would later be recognized by reviewers as an exceptional individual case. Unfortunately, Irlbeck does not tell us the origin of his high literacy skills, but considering the fact that he had been born sixteen years prior to the introduction of compulsory education in Bavaria, he was in all likelihood mainly self-taught.

Irlbeck's request also marked a leap from one social chamber of knowledge to another in terms of a provocation. His book, while praised for its subject-specific content, contained polemic passages that were considered highly imprudent by the *Verein's* reviewers. Significantly, as he asserted his own expertise and experience in the field of agriculture, Irlbeck refused to concede the same competence to what he called scholarly authors "*gelehrte Schriftsteller*." It can thus be considered a stroke of luck that this extraordinary codification of a peasant voice, along with its accompanying letter and certificates, was printed in Augsburg, 250 kilometers away, in spite of the ambivalent stance of its reviewers.⁴⁵ It is noteworthy that by eventually publishing his thoughts, Irlbeck participated in a public conversation from which members of his social group had traditionally been excluded. Precisely because this exclusion was a structural one, exceptions like Irlbeck, Maus, or Pahlitzsch shine all the brighter. The reproaches of being presumptuous did little to shake Irlbeck's self-confidence. As he affirmed in his note of thanks to the *Verein*: "To my knowledge, the world has not yet seen a peasant who produced a textbook of his trade. If this has indeed been accomplished, it can be said without any vain-glory that I have delivered something extraordinary by any account."⁴⁶

A fact that sets Irlbeck apart from earlier peasant authors and that reveals him to be a nineteenth-century actor are his bold political demands. Throughout his work, Irlbeck calls for the peasantry to be given unconditional expert status regarding agricultural knowledge, a request that occasionally culminates

⁴⁰ See Stapelbroek and Marjanen, *Economic Societies*. Specifically on the German lands see Lowood, *Patriotism*.

⁴¹ It was only from 1869 onwards that peasant farmers, whose interests the *Verein* was not able to represent, organized themselves into so-called patriotic *Bauernvereine*. See in the synopsis of the *Verein's* history in Harrecker, *Verein*, 353–54.

⁴² This was later reported by a member of the *Verein* in the regional newspaper, see "Die übertriebene Humanität," 113–19.

⁴³ Irlbeck, *Landwirtschaft*, title page.

⁴⁴ Secord, "Science in the Pub." See also Hickman, "Proper Gardiner," and Brassington, "James Croll" analyzing the strategies of self-educated men to avoid judgement on their social background.

⁴⁵ In addition to the base text, the book contains Irlbeck's accompanying letter to the manuscript, the "examination certificate" with the critique by the *Verein*, Irlbeck's response to this critique, as well as a report by the Kötzing country judge as valuable paratexts.

⁴⁶ "Noch kennt die Welt meines Wissens keinen Bauer, der ein Lehrbuch seines Handwerks lieferte. Sollte dasselbe auch gelungen seyn, so habe ich ohne Ruhmredigkeit in jeder Hinsicht etwas Außerordentliches geliefert [...]" Irlbeck, *Landwirtschaft*, vol. 1, XXXVII. In his subsequent treatise on flax growing, Irlbeck no longer emphasizes his peasant status and instead confidently calls himself an "economist and author," see Irlbeck, *Flachsbau*. Regarding the accusation of "hubris," "vain glory," "scorn of others," etc. made by the reviewers, see Irlbeck, *Landwirtschaft*, vol. 1, XIX–XX.

in remarkable demands for political participation, including that peasant farmers should be consulted in agricultural matters and paid for passing on their knowledge and expertise, just like other scholars. According to Irlbeck, the economy could be sustained on the national scale only if peasant producers were represented in local associations such as the *Verein*, as well as at the government level by a number of privy councilors and “at least” one minister. Irlbeck maintained that if peasants were to put their advice in written form, the “expensive notions” of agriculture would swiftly vanish from the market.⁴⁷

Irlbeck’s political demands in the 1830s expressed a sense of social change, a feeling of *Vormärz* [pre-March] even, which denotes the period of political uprising in the German lands preceding the 1848 March Revolution. *Vormärz* thinkers and activists called for the unification of the German lands, for liberalism, constitutionalism, or more radically, for universal suffrage and republicanism.⁴⁸ Compared with the authoritarian regimes of Prussia and Austria, the constitutional charter of the Bavarian monarchy can be seen as relatively progressive. Installed in 1818 after the fall of Napoleon in 1815, the charter already included the term citizen (*Staatsbürger*). From then on, non-aristocratic landowners were given the opportunity to be elected to the second chamber of the Estates Assembly, where they had a right of assent or veto.⁴⁹ Political participation, however, continued to be organized along the lines of class and was tied, in particular, to land ownership. Hence the peasantry, still largely governed by landlords, could neither vote nor be elected. It was not until the introduction of so-called land relief (*Grundentlastung*) in the course of the reforms of 1848 that male representatives of the lower classes were first given the prospect of free disposal of their farmland and basic political rights. Even after the revolutionary years around 1848, however, the rural population largely remained dependent on landlords. Irlbeck, on the other hand, markedly claimed his political entitlement as early as in the 1830s. He even took pains to hurl his knowledge claims into the educated circles of the local elites. Now, what can account for—at least parts of—his self-confidence?

The Material Conditions of Irlbeck’s Authorship

Historians of rural society have pointed to the considerable diversity of rural legal and ownership structures and the according social variety of rural actors in premodern Europe. There is a broad consensus that economic behavior primarily depended on the respective legal and economic context and related opportunities, so that, depending on the context, the lower rural classes could turn out to be a reform-minded force in one place, and a conservative one in another.⁵⁰ It therefore appears to be useful, if not necessary, to further explore Irlbeck’s legal and economic status, as far as this is possible, on the basis of the new empirical sources. As already mentioned, the dues and taxes the inhabitants of Liebenstein paid to their superiors in the early nineteenth century were calculated based on the value of the farms. Local archivist Clemens Pongratz has discovered that Irlbeck paid only a comparatively low annual land tax of 2.2 guilders as well as a fixed amount of rye for his half-size farm due to a remarkable fact: the peasant farmer had bought himself out of all duties and taxes in 1810 by making a one-time payment of 550 guilders to the impoverished Nothafft family. Later, the Bavarian state continued to grant Irlbeck his acquired financial freedom after becoming the new superior.⁵¹ Irlbeck’s legal conditions were, in other words, exceptional, and a good starting point for economic activity, for additional revenues were not skimmed off by his landlord, and personal commitment could therefore pay off.

During his active period, Irlbeck apparently invested his profits in his numerous farm improvements. After overcoming his early failures with clover cultivation, he enjoyed an economic success that allowed him to delegate work to day laborers thus freeing him from most forms of back-breaking labor. His economic *and* epistemic position is therefore best characterized as managerial and administrative. Like agricultural improvers with a noble or bourgeois background, Irlbeck read specialist literature in his spare time. His own writing, as has already been stressed, was an activity which clearly transcended class boundaries even in the case of a wealthy peasant. Without having received schooling, let alone a university education, Irlbeck nevertheless managed to appropriate the literary norms and standards of the educated classes. It seems plausible that his material and intellectual achievements and his strong

⁴⁷ Irlbeck, *Landwirtschaft*, vol. 1, XXXVIII, 114.

⁴⁸ During the *Vormärz* period, the literature of *Volksaufklärung* also featured emancipatory, though not radical, political impulses. See Krünes, *Volksaufklärung Vormärz*.

⁴⁹ See the Bavarian constitutional charter from 1818, “Verfassungsurkunde für das Königreich Bayern.”

⁵⁰ For instance, Prass, *Grundzüge der Agrargeschichte*.

⁵¹ AVC, Katasterauszug, Liquidationsprotokoll Gemeinde Liebenstein (Hausnummern 12 und 13), 03–02–1853, unpag.; StALa, Landgericht ä.O. Kötzing, Briefprotokolle 1838/39, Nr. 965, unpag.

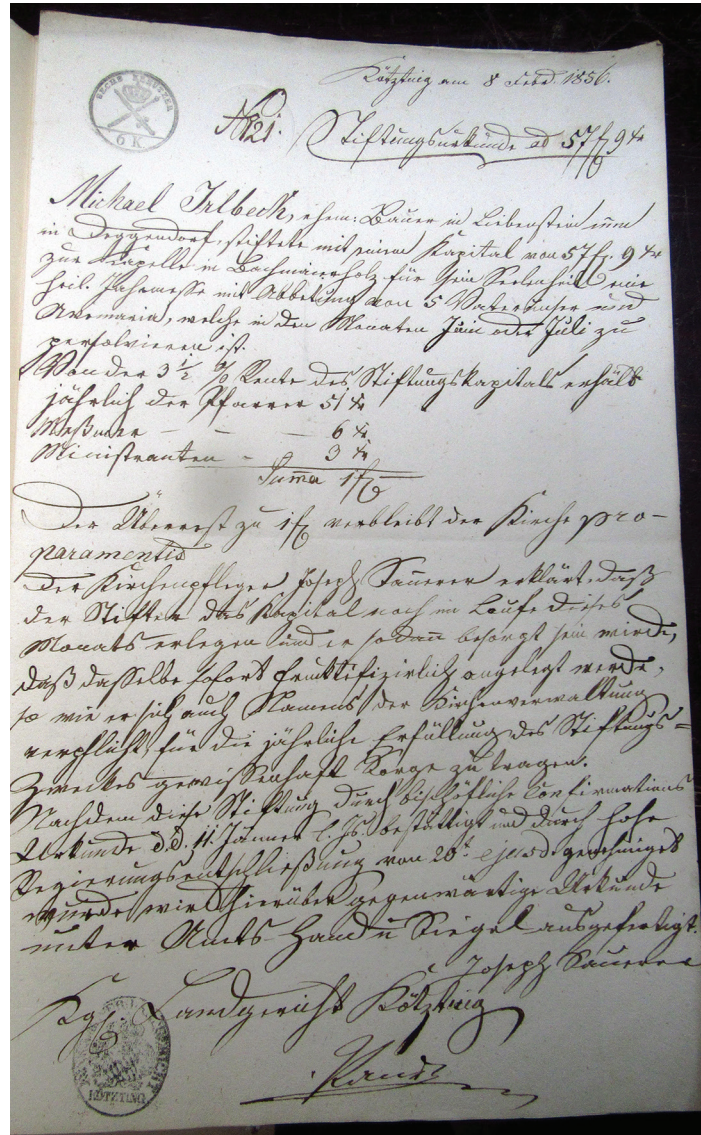


Figure 2: Irlbeck’s capital endowment for the Bachmeierholz chapel dated 8 February 1856, Source: StALa, Landgericht ä.O. Kötzing, Nr. 355, unpag.

personality were interrelated and mutually reinforcing. Irlbeck’s economic independence also apparently spurred his polemics against the middle-class project of *Volksaufklärung*. After all, he did not have to pay tribute to anyone and, consequently, Irlbeck spared the forms of deference commonly used in inter-class communication.⁵²

As he neared the end of his life, Irlbeck had eventually generated a significant level of wealth. After leaving the farm to his daughter and son-in-law in 1839, he still had a substantial amount of money, allowing him to invest in his salvation and the commonweal. Several capital endowments and donations went, for instance, to the nearby chapel of Bachmeierholz and the church of Rimbach.

In the case of Bachmeierholz, Irlbeck bought five *Our Father* and *Ave Maria* prayers at a Holy Anniversary Mass to be held in June or July in his honor, and for all eternity.⁵³ The annual interest yielded by his investment was to pay a fixed sum to the priest, the priest’s helping hand and the altar boys, whereas the rest was to be used for the material equipment of the chapel (Fig. 2). In a preserved letter to the parish

⁵² Joyce, *Work, Society, Politics*, 80.

⁵³ According to Alfred Silberbauer, this “eternity” ended with the First World War, after which the Catholic Church did not continue its tradition of commercialized Holy Masses, conversation with Silberbauer, March 30, 2021. Irlbeck invested roughly fifty guilders for his annual Mass at the Bachmeierholz chapel, and 194 guilders for another annual Mass at the Rimbach church, see Staatsarchiv Landshut, Landgericht ä.O. Kötzing, 356, unpag.

priest of Rimbach from 1859, Irlbeck announced another donation of 300 guilders for the purchase of new Stations of the Cross paintings. At some time earlier, he had donated 149 guilders for the consecration of the church. These acts suggest that Irlbeck had become, by the end of his life, a fairly rich man, at least in terms of peasant society.⁵⁴

Conclusion: Knowledge Chambers, Rural Subjectivity, and Social Change

The most remarkable aspect of Irlbeck's book is the fact that it retrospectively weighs in on a conversation in which the common rural population, although ubiquitously discussed as a subject, had barely had any opportunity to participate during the Enlightenment era and beyond. The structural exclusion of the lower classes gradually ceased as universal schooling took hold, which, unsurprisingly, eventually rendered the project of *Volksaufklärung* obsolete as well. Placed within a pre-industrial socioscape, publicly debating methods of economic improvement and patriotism by a peasant was tantamount to him leaving his native chamber of knowledge and breaching into those of the local elites and the wider literary public. In this article, the mystery of Irlbeck's case can at least be partially explained in the light of new evidence. Among the preconditions for Irlbeck's transgressive agency were, first, personal qualities and skills, such as his acquired competence in the written language, his networking abilities, and his personality marked by ambition, perseverance, and belligerence. Second, he received support from a member of the local elite, the country court judge, as well as the local agricultural association, the *Landwirtschaftlicher Verein*. Firmly in the tradition of the agrarian societies of the Enlightenment, the *Verein's* noble and bourgeois members created a knowledge chamber with its own public institutions in which Irlbeck, although not a member, was accepted and considered capable. Third, Irlbeck's agency was facilitated by general trends of social change. For one, the ascendance of useful knowledge during the eighteenth century as well as egalitarian ideals implying social mobility through education, were important ideological strands supporting Irlbeck's subject position. Moreover, the established literary public that mediated these ideas had made the role of public critic attainable for Irlbeck in the first place. What is more, the nineteenth century brought new trends soliciting political change such as liberalism, constitutionalism, or early socialism, articulated in the movement of *Vormärz*. Irlbeck, a conservative who never got tired of reminiscing about the better old days and who was continuously upset about the sexual morals of the landless poor, especially women, at the same time took the progressive ideas of citizenship and constitutionalism to heart. He demanded nothing less than political representation of his peers, not only in local associations such as the *Verein*, but also in the Bavarian government. On the basis of Irlbeck's claims, there is a clear discrepancy between his political consciousness and the persisting social and political structures of the *Ancien Régime* during the 1830s. Irlbeck's political demands, as has been discussed, also set him apart from earlier peasant figures and authors from the Enlightenment period.

Finally, a *sine qua non* for Irlbeck's agency, besides intelligence and economic talent, was his exceptional legal situation due to the impoverishment of his former superiors, the noble Nothafft family. Irlbeck understood how to turn his privileged situation into economic success, which in turn allowed him to step back from time and energy-consuming manual labor, concentrating on directing and managing it instead. Irlbeck must have had spare time, which he used, comparable to noble and bourgeois agricultural improvers, to read and write about agriculture. Irlbeck's emergence into history is significant precisely because of his role as a subaltern knowledge-maker, publicly speaking for himself and revolting against the "enlightened" representations of the peasantry as tradition-fixated, "superstitious," and resistant to agricultural improvement. Whether Irlbeck can be considered a subaltern, however, also depends on the vantage point. He stood at the very top of his village's social hierarchy, economically successful, a ruler of his own subalterns.

Irlbeck's case points to disruptions and common boundaries in the circulation of knowledge within an estate-based society. Viewed as a whole, the knowledge system was especially lacking when it came to providing communication and feedback loops between social groups divided along political, legal, and cultural lines. Although Irlbeck's case suggests that the literature of *Volksaufklärung* indeed reached the villages, it was obviously barely feasible for feedback from the rural population to be effectively circulated back into the knowledge chambers of the educated classes. Once Irlbeck had overcome the barrier of literacy, however, he actually gained the acceptance of the local elite, and some of his claims were assessed

⁵⁴ Based on the beer price, local historians around Kötzing have estimated that a guilder in Irlbeck's day was equivalent to about 100 to 150 Euros, conversation with Pongratz, March 25, 2021.

favorably. Irlbeck thus entered a distinct knowledge chamber, that is, the public debates about agricultural improvement. It is important to keep in mind the extraordinary conditions, as discussed in this article, that facilitated Irlbeck's agency as well as the social structures that blocked almost all of his fellows from the same. His case specifically reminds us of when class matters and why it should continue to inform our theoretical vocabulary.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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