

FORUM

## Fulfilling the Promise of the History of Knowledge: Key Approaches for the 2020s

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### Integrative and generative capacities

The history of knowledge promises to become one of the most vibrant fields of historical writing of the 2020s. In the previous decade, it emerged as a new scholarly enterprise.<sup>1</sup> As we now seem to enter a second and perhaps more mature phase, however, a few fundamental questions need to be raised. How can the field consolidate without losing momentum? What, if anything, distinguishes the history of knowledge from other adjacent fields? And how may historians of knowledge contribute to the development of historical research more broadly?

As is the case with most new branches of scholarship, the history of knowledge has been challenged from various positions. Historian of science Lorraine Daston has accused it of being too vague and all-embracing. Its central concept, knowledge, seems to lack a clear definition, and she asks what doesn't the field comprise?<sup>2</sup> In a similar vein, intellectual historian Suzanne Marchand has posed the question of whether the field offers only "new wine in slightly stretched old wine skins."<sup>3</sup> What its proponents envision as something novel, several scholars have argued, might be nothing more than what historians of science and intellectual historians have been doing for the last two decades.<sup>4</sup> A more general problem is the conspicuous discrepancy between programmatic statements and actual research practices: while in theory advocating a broadly defined understanding of knowledge, empirical studies in this field tend to focus on traditional experts and academic knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

Despite these objections, the history of knowledge has rapidly received more and more attention in recent years. It has evidently managed to provide a productive platform where approaches from a number of different disciplines—cultural history, global history, media history, intellectual history, history of science, history of the book, etc.—may be brought together and cross-fertilize each other. This integrative capacity is undoubtedly one of the greatest merits of the field so far. Sometimes this open-mindedness is manifested in an encyclopedic tendency to encompass almost all forms of knowledge, for instance, in books by Peter Burke and Christian Jacob.<sup>6</sup>

It is our conviction, however, that the generative capacity of the history of knowledge also needs to be developed. We look upon this as the ability to create new questions, perspectives, frameworks, methods, themes, and concepts that are not part of existing discourses or practices. By doing so, we believe that original and more distinct contributions can be made in the years to come. In our opinion, this is one of the key challenges for the field.

<sup>1</sup> Sarasin, "Was ist Wissensgeschichte?"; Burke, *History of Knowledge?*; Lässig, "History of Knowledge." For historiographical discussions, see Östling et al., "History of Knowledge"; and Östling, "Circulation and Public Arenas." See also the contributions in the special issue of *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte* 42, nos. 2–3 (2019), in particular, Joas, "Introduction"; Marchand, "How Much Knowledge?"; and Dupré and Somsen, "History of Knowledge."

<sup>2</sup> Daston, "History of Science"; Mulsow and Daston, "History of Knowledge."

<sup>3</sup> Marchand, "How Much Knowledge?," 127.

<sup>4</sup> Bergwik and Holmberg, "Standing on Whose Shoulders?"; Nickelsen, "Zukunft"; Mulsow and Daston, "History of Knowledge."

<sup>5</sup> Lässig, "The History of Knowledge."

<sup>6</sup> Burke, *Social History, Social History*, vol. 2; Jacob, *Lieux de savoir*, vol. 1, *Lieux de savoir*, vol. 2.

In what follows, we discuss how the history of knowledge can continue to incorporate insights from a wide range of academic disciplines and at the same time open up new horizons. We mainly draw on examples from studies originating from our Nordic research community, an intellectual constellation devoted to the history of knowledge that took shape in the second half of the 2010s with Lund as its main hub, a development that culminated in the inauguration of the Lund Centre for the History of Knowledge (LUCK) in March 2020. It is fair to say that a large number of our contributions have had a focus on knowledge with “social relevance.” In this research, we discern two main directions: analyses of knowledge in society and of knowledge in people’s lives.<sup>7</sup>

## Knowledge in society

The first direction—the societal dimensions of knowledge—has been stressed by some of the leading figures in this field in the 2010s. In his programmatic article, Philipp Sarasin proposed that the history of knowledge should be about “the societal production and circulation of knowledge.”<sup>8</sup> In another important text, Simone Lässig described the field as a form of social and cultural history that examines knowledge as a phenomenon touching upon almost every sphere of people’s lives. She insists that the history of knowledge should not emphasize knowledge instead of society but rather seek “to analyze and comprehend knowledge in society and knowledge in culture.”<sup>9</sup>

One way of studying knowledge in society is to employ the concept of circulation. This has been one of the most popular frameworks in the history of knowledge so far; however, there is no agreement on how to define this concept. In fact, there are several parallel interpretations. First, there is the geographical understanding of circulation, which has been used to analyze how knowledge travels over vast distances. Second, there is a social interpretation in which circulation represents an alternative to a unidirectional model where knowledge is spread to passive consumers and audiences. Finally, there is a material approach to circulation, focusing on the movement of objects that underpin and transfigure knowledge.<sup>10</sup>

What these three approaches have in common is that they renounce simplistic diffusionist models and theories of linear dispersion. By highlighting the transformative character of knowledge, this concept has turned out to be genuinely productive and has inspired a large number of recent studies. However, the societal aspects of knowledge have not been brought to the fore. To this end, we have introduced the concept of the “societal circulation of knowledge” as a separate framework of analysis.<sup>11</sup>

The societal circulation of knowledge implies that knowledge should be studied as a broad political, social, and cultural phenomenon. This suggests that the societal reach and relevance of the knowledge under scrutiny must reside at the core of the analysis. Historical events and phenomena that only affect a few individuals or small groups of people cannot be a point of departure for such a study. This means that original innovations and novel findings are less important while knowledge that has more direct relevance to society takes center stage. In the following paragraphs, we offer a number of examples of how this may be studied.

The ongoing research project, “Humanities in Motion,” examines the circulation of knowledge originating in the humanities in postwar Sweden and West Germany. A key analytical concept is the “public arena of knowledge.” This is understood as a place or platform that, within its given framework, offers the opportunity and sets the limits for certain forms of the circulation of knowledge. It serves as a site for interactions between knowledge actors and their audiences.<sup>12</sup>

The concept of “arena” serves as a theoretical underpinning for three empirical studies in this project. One study analyzes how scholars promoted academic knowledge in early television; a second looks at book cafes as an alternative type of public sphere for the New Left; and a third studies Christian periodicals and how they comprised a platform where knowledge originating in the humanities circulated.<sup>13</sup> By focusing on public arenas of circulation, this project gives us a new understanding of the societal importance of postwar humanities, thereby challenging a crisis narrative that is prevalent in the established historiography.

<sup>7</sup> Östling et al., *Circulation of Knowledge*; Östling, Larsson Heidenblad, and Nilsson Hammar, *Forms of Knowledge*; Östling, Olsen, and Larsson Heidenblad, *Histories of Knowledge*. See also the website of the Lund Centre for the History of Knowledge (LUCK): <https://newhistoryofknowledge.com>.

<sup>8</sup> Sarasin, “Was ist Wissensgeschichte?,” 165.

<sup>9</sup> Lässig, “History of Knowledge,” 58.

<sup>10</sup> Östling et al., “History of Knowledge.”

<sup>11</sup> Östling and Larsson Heidenblad, “Circulation,” “From Cultural History.”

<sup>12</sup> Östling, “En kunskapsarena,” “Circulation and Public Arenas.”

<sup>13</sup> Svensson, “Scandinavian Book Cafes”; Jansson, “City, Church, 1960’s.”

In a different project, Erik Bodensten reinterprets the foundation of one of the most important agricultural transformations in Sweden by analyzing how a breakthrough in societal knowledge occurred from 1749 to 1750. Thanks to two forms of media, the pulpit and the printed almanac, knowledge regarding an entirely new crop—the potato—was able to circulate in different social groups. By extension, Bodensten argues, this knowledge intervention proved highly significant for Swedish society.<sup>14</sup> In yet another project, David Larsson Heidenblad studies how environmental knowledge began to circulate in Swedish society at large during the late 1960s. By focusing on the moment of a “societal breakthrough of knowledge” rather than on precursors and intellectual lineages, he seeks to write a new and expanded history of modern environmentalism.<sup>15</sup> Taken together, these examples point to the merits of studying knowledge in society.

### Knowledge in people’s lives

The second direction we are beginning to see the contours of is knowledge in people’s lives. This concerns how various forms of knowledge have been practiced and engaged with in the lives of ordinary persons. Proponents of this form of the history of knowledge, such as Anna Nilsson Hammar, argue that, to date, historians of knowledge have been preoccupied with theoretical knowledge claims while neglecting the role of knowledge in shaping lifeworlds and molding everyday actions. We should, she maintains, turn our attention towards how knowledge has been used, routinized, lived, and experienced.<sup>16</sup>

We believe that this take on the history of knowledge has the potential to invigorate the field. However, there are methodological difficulties, especially regarding periods and topics where the available source material is scarce and piecemeal. Yet, these challenges are hardly insurmountable, and we look forward to seeing how our colleagues working on the early modern period will address these issues. In this position paper, however, we demonstrate the implications of this direction by highlighting a multifaceted modern example: climate change. How can we write the history of this phenomenon? Which chronologies should we employ?

Historians can legitimately answer these questions in many ways. Environmental historians, curious about interactions between humans and the non-human world, will possibly take a long view of thousands, perhaps even tens of thousands of years. On this scale, individual actors and subjective lifeworlds are largely invisible. Historians of science who are interested in scientific discoveries and intellectual lineages can begin in the nineteenth century. Other historians of science might scrutinize the postwar period and its Cold War context, rapidly growing computational power, and international networks of scientists and politicians. Media historians interested in the circulation of knowledge in the public sphere might turn their attention to the late 1980s when “global warming” emerged as a key public concern, or the period 2006–2009 when “climate change” rose to the fore.<sup>17</sup>

Historians of knowledge interested in lifeworlds and everyday practices are able to open up other new vistas on this topic. In recent years, we have witnessed teenagers all over the world going on school strikes. Others have turned to vegetarianism, installed solar panels, divested their retirement plans, or boycotted air travel. Still others have not changed their lifestyle but have experienced a bad conscience (or not). Historians of knowledge could address all these issues. If we did, our studies would most certainly enrich and, perhaps challenge, the works of environmental historians, historians of science, and media historians.

We believe that a deliberate focus on knowledge in people’s lives can help us find and frame new research themes. In particular, we are able to put emphasis on socially relevant forms of knowledge that have had rather weak links to learned spheres and formal education. For example, financial knowledge is clearly an important aspect of everyday life in all monetized societies. However, few people learn to save, spend, borrow, and invest in school. Historians of knowledge are well-equipped to engage with this understudied societal phenomenon.<sup>18</sup> Another example is Elaine Leong’s research on the role of recipes and early modern households as knowledge institutions.<sup>19</sup> Other scholars have stressed the need to more fully incorporate the study of religious knowledge into the history of knowledge.<sup>20</sup> Taken together, these examples show that historians of knowledge have much to gain by directing their attention towards lifeworlds and everyday practices.

<sup>14</sup> Bodensten, “Societal Knowledge Breakthrough.”

<sup>15</sup> Larsson Heidenblad, “Mapping a New History”; Larsson Heidenblad, *Environmental Turn*.

<sup>16</sup> Nilsson Hammar, “Theoria, Praxis, and Poiesis.”

<sup>17</sup> Hulme, “Public Life”; Howe, *Behind the Curve*.

<sup>18</sup> Calder, “Saving and Spending”; Larsson Heidenblad, “Financial Knowledge.”

<sup>19</sup> Leong, *Recipes and Everyday Knowledge*.

<sup>20</sup> Von der Krone, “Religious Knowledge”; Brilkman and Nilsson Hammar, “Religion as Knowledge.”

## Fulfilling the promise

We envision that the history of knowledge will offer novel and original contributions to historical scholarship in the 2020s. We believe that the field can, and should, make a real difference. We consider this high level of ambition appropriate, even mandatory, for a field attracting as much scholarly attention, funding, and opportunities as the history of knowledge currently does. Hence, in the 2020s, historians of knowledge will need to demonstrate how the field opens up new lines of inquiry. What do we research that others do not? Which novel insights do we provide? In which ways do we challenge and reinterpret history?

We propose that knowledge in society and knowledge in people's lives constitute two promising trajectories in the history of knowledge. We believe that historians of knowledge would be wise to direct their attention towards the social reach and relevance of various forms of knowledge. This take on the history of knowledge has manifest consequences for empirical research. It implies a deliberate shift in analytical focus towards processes and phenomena that touch upon the lives of the many—not just a select few. Hence, when historians of knowledge study climate change in society or people's lives, they pursue a research agenda that differs from conventional lines of inquiry.

Our conception of the history of knowledge clearly draws upon political, social, and cultural history. The latter field emerged in the 1970s and 1980s through ground-breaking and imaginative studies. When Lynn Hunt edited *The New Cultural History* in 1989, she could point to the empirical works of Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie (1975), Peter Burke (1978), Carlo Ginzburg (1980), Natalie Zemon Davis (1983), and Robert Darnton (1984). We historians of knowledge cannot do the same as our field has emerged through scholarly debate rather than empirical inquiry. We do not as of yet have signature works displaying the potential of our field.

However, the programmatically broad research agenda and the elastic concept of knowledge have successfully brought together scholars with disparate interests and backgrounds. Evidently, a great many historians can, in one way or another, relate their research to “knowledge.” This indicates that knowledge can indeed serve as a fundamental analytical category, one that touches upon almost all spheres of human life.

Yet, in practice, the history of knowledge clearly runs the risk of becoming just a rebranding of the history of science and scholarship. However, we believe that the field has the potential to become something more and different. What we need to do is to demonstrate this in actual research. The history of knowledge needs its own *Martin Guerre*, *Montaillou*, and *The Great Cat Massacre*. Hopefully, this journal will be the flagship for such a development.

Moreover, we do believe that there is a growing need for the formation of research clusters around certain periods and problems. Ideally, these would address issues not currently studied in neighboring fields or, at the very least, not studied in the same ways. If we were to succeed in this endeavor, it would not only decisively distinguish the history of knowledge from other branches of scholarly inquiry. It would also provide us with strong arguments for the potential of this field to invigorate historical scholarship at large. In this way, we can fulfil the promise of the history of knowledge.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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