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More Than Just Another Specialty: On the Prospects for the History of Knowledge

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Like any other scientific discipline, history is divided into a large array of scholarly specializations, subdisciplines, and, most of all, a vast variety of fields of inquiry. However, within the nineteenth-century tradition of “historicist” historiography, this variety was held together by the modern belief in *Die Geschichte*, that is, “History” with a capital H, a *Kollektivsingular*, as Reinhart Koselleck has famously put it.¹ It meant that all these diverse histories and inquiries were part of and contributed to our knowledge of “the whole” of History. Within the modern logic of its temporal structure, History as our past *and* the knowledge of that past were a source of orientation in the present and, at the same time, opened up a view of progress and the possibility of agency in the future. By the late 1970s, however, these modern certainties began to fall apart, and we, or at least many of us, lost faith in such “grand narratives.” But we not only lost our faith in the steady track of progress; we also became more and more aware of the fact that the synecdochic relation between the many (hi)stories and “History” was full of ideological traps, such as to consider the history of, say, one great nation as a representative of “Europe” or “Western Civilization,” terms which quite magically stand for the history of all mankind. Or, similarly, to take the history of white men as doing the same magic.

Nevertheless, even under this condition, which Lyotard has called postmodern, we cannot, as historians, give up the notion of a connection between a singular story or case and some “larger” context or some idea of the “whole” of, for instance, a war, a century, colonialism, or popular culture.² Carlo Ginzburg explicitly took his Menocchio not as a mere singularity, which means nothing else than that he existed and fabricated a strange cosmology, but rather as a “window” into the hidden, indeed lost, folk religion in sixteenth-century northern Italy.³

In order to organize this kind of synecdochic relation on which, in multiple ways, all our explanations of singular stories or cases and their significance are based, we rely on concepts and theories which we label as “political,” “social,” or “cultural.” The use of such concepts makes it possible not only to organize and decode the case under investigation but also to link it to a larger context, even a “whole.” Hence, the question arises whether the relatively new concept of “knowledge” could function in a similar way—and how exactly this would be the case. Is the History of Knowledge more than an interesting field of study, such as the history of books, of instruments of measurement, or of learned societies—or could it be something as far-reaching as Political, Social, or Cultural History as such? Could the History of Knowledge even replace older concepts, especially “social” or “cultural history” altogether—and, if so, how?

It might be too early to tell, but in what follows I would like to argue that the History of Knowledge is in fact much more than a collection of new types of stamps. Peter Burke’s *What is the History of Knowledge?* imaginatively describes this new approach in a way that reaches far beyond any “field of study.”⁴ His manifold explorations of “Knowledges and their Histories” and of all possible “Concepts” and “Processes” related to knowledge, not to mention his rich use of examples, which he provides page after page, suggests aptly that

¹ Koselleck, *Begriffsgeschichten*, 66.

² Lyotard, *Condition postmoderne*.

³ Ginzburg, *Cheese and the Worms*.

⁴ Burke, *History of Knowledge?*

you can't escape from "knowledge" in the study of history at all. Right from the beginning, Burke, as the world-renown historian of culture that he is, not only follows Michel Foucault's claim that we have to speak of "knowledges" in plural, but in doing so, he light-handedly, although somewhat implicitly, substitutes the very concept of "culture" with "knowledge."⁵ Burke writes: "Even within a given culture, there are different kinds of knowledge: pure and applied, abstract and concrete, explicit and implicit, learned and popular, male and female, local and universal, knowing how to do something and knowing that something is the case."⁶

In other words, and following this assessment, one might call the "whole" of all meanings, symbolic forms, worldviews, and individual expressions put together "culture"—but to study it, we'd rather break it down into a variety of different forms and patterns of knowledge. "Knowledge" in this understanding is virtually everything that can be thought, believed, spoken out, or what is hidden or merely implicit, "unknown," "tacit," or "forgotten." Hence, Burke also states that he does not view the notion of knowledge to be in any way exclusively bound to something like rationality, but, on the contrary, that it must also encompass belief systems.

I will come back to this point later. Here, to begin, I would like to emphasize how much Peter Burke's History of Knowledge is—declaredly—a legacy of Michel Foucault's *Archéologie du Savoir* (1969). For Foucault, knowledge was everything that is somehow organized and "stabilized" in a discourse and, therefore, can be shared and may produce truth-claims. There is—to state the obvious—no possibility of "measuring" or "evaluating" such truth claims since there is no extra-historical scale for it. We can only describe them historically, analyze their inner structures and workings, and reconstruct their power effects. In order to do so, we should—and Peter Burke is well aware of this—take Foucault's notion of "orders of knowledge" very seriously.⁷ This term leads to at least two important insights, well-known I guess but probably worth keeping in mind: First, that there are simultaneously many and very different such orders in the world, which Burke demonstrates in an exemplary manner by constantly pointing to Indian, Chinese, or Arabian orders of knowledge as being different from what "we" might consider to be true, rational, or factual. In short, the History of Knowledge is, as such, inevitably decentered and post-colonial.

Second, the concept of "orders of knowledge" reminds us that every speaker—or subject—gains, organizes, and expresses his or her knowledge within such orders and therefore cannot be regarded as its "originator." This evidently doesn't mean that subjects are, sort of, "programmed" or "determined" by "structures" (which would imply the reopening of an old and fruitless discussion). Following the conceptual perspective of "orders of knowledge," it is much more interesting to ask whether knowledge in fact does have *any* specific origin, that is, a single point from where it might "diffuse," for instance, from the lab to popular science books or, generally speaking, from the university to society at large. In my understanding, one of the main features and strengths of the History-of-Knowledge approach lies exactly in the rejection of such a view.⁸ Perhaps Burke is not clear enough in this regard. Referring to "popularisation," he surely states that knowledge diffuses, even circulates, but probably the most important point here is somehow buried beneath his many examples: that there is no such thing as the *rupture épistémologique*, that is, the sharp distinction between science and non-science so dear to the epistemological thinking of Gaston Bachelard, who on this point has been followed by Louis Althusser in coining the term *coupure épistémologique*.⁹ In sharp contrast, Foucault's concept of "orders of knowledge" not only deliberately encompasses various textual "genres"—so that a given order of knowledge may include scientific texts, popular ways of speaking, even poetry. But with Foucault's "order of knowledge," it is generally not possible to ask for the "origin" of such and such thinking or of such and such knowledge. There might have been an "originator" like Gregor Mendel, to cite only one famous example, but his findings on heredity almost didn't mean anything to anybody until the order of knowledge in biology had shifted in his direction some forty years later.¹⁰ Hence, the new knowledge on heredity obviously had many "origins."

Knowledge circulates between individuals and groups because signs, discursive forms, and semantic contents have the power to glide across institutional, social, political, or even geographical boundaries—which therefore cannot be seen as primordial "frameworks" or "conditions" and thus as "starting points" of an inquiry. These frames *are* important—to state that knowledge spreads without limits and is evenly distributed everywhere would be naive—but they do not *constitute* an order of knowledge, which always has a discursive reality of its own, and they do not prevent circulation. More so, knowledge in its "functioning"

⁵ Foucault, *Archéologie du savoir*.

⁶ Burke, *History of Knowledge?*, 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 25–26.

⁸ Sarasin, "Was ist Wissensgeschichte?"

⁹ Burke, *History of Knowledge?*, 77; Althusser, *Pour Marx*.

¹⁰ Foucault, *Ordre du discours*.

depends on circulation; it reacts to “impulses” from other fields of knowledge and various social spheres in different social spaces, and it is taken up again in other places and thereby transformed.

As I have shown elsewhere, for instance, German bacteriologists in the late nineteenth century were not only confined to their laboratories, but were—of course—reading newspapers and were engaged in political debates, with the effect that they introduced the political language of “migration,” “invasion,” and of (racial) “enemies” already into their very first research papers on bacteria.¹¹ However, with all its circulation, knowledge does not become “locationless”; knowledge is, as Burke says with reference to Donna Haraway, “situated.”¹² Knowledge, one could further conclude, is therefore fundamentally hybrid: even in well-founded scientific concepts and theories there are always more or less clear traces of their sites of production, of cultural, political, or social conditions of their existence, and of the specific uses of that knowledge.¹³ Knowledge is not a spirit that floats above the waters. But it floats and it changes in all these processes: On the one hand, because media necessarily format knowledge in specific ways (I will come back to this in a moment), and on the other, because different recipients, who in principle are also (co-)producers of knowledge, do different things with knowledge because they too always receive and pass on knowledge in a slightly new, different way.

A third point I would like to emphasize is the materiality and mediality of knowledge, which is largely present in Burke’s account but perhaps not quite so clearly as a founding trait of his approach as such. On one side, the practices of knowledge production are always of a material nature, as the “practical turn” has made evident.¹⁴ On the other side, and perhaps more importantly, knowledge cannot exist without storage, transport, and presentation media. This means that knowledge is shaped by the logic of these media because it must *always* be formatted, and that it is always changed—or to be more precise, further produced—in its path through such channels. In particular, the various forms of representation, the display, and thus the production of evidence produce/change knowledge, as do the different forms of circulation. Hence, media function as filters that select, emphasize, and suppress knowledge and connect it with other knowledge resources.

To sum up this very brief account, in my view, (a) orders of knowledge, (b) circulation and non-originality, and (c) materiality and mediality are the pillars of the History of Knowledge approach. So, one would like to ask, What do we get out of it? Does it help us to (re-)write history? Or is it just a fancy *façon de parler*? Is everything that used to be “intention” or an “argument,” a “discourse,” or simply “cultural” now labeled as “knowledge” without changing much in the reading of our sources, the conceptualization of our histories, and our self-defining quest for so-called first-hand evidence gained from subjects in the past and their “experience”? I am of course referring to Joan W. Scott’s famous article “The Evidence of Experience” where she convincingly shows that also the most unexpected, striking experience—beyond what Lacan aptly called the “impact of the Real”—is always already an interpretation or, as Scott put it, “the substitution of one interpretation for another.”¹⁵ In other words, instead of taking the accounts in so-called ego-documents as the “origin” of our own historical knowledge, we have to ask how these “experiences” (as they lay before us in textual form) have been made possible by specific orders of knowledge, how the categories and the vocabulary in these sources came into being, how they have ousted other possible ways of speaking, and how and why people can—or cannot—identify themselves within these frames. To be very concise: when we follow this lead as well as Roger Chartier’s advice not to start with the *grille socio-professionnelle* but with the *représentations* people are making of their world, that is, their interpretations—based, for instance, on the books these people were reading, we abandon the history of allegedly pre-existing and prediscursive social orders or cultures.¹⁶ We are even able, as Svenja Goltermann has shown, to decipher the ever-changing historicity in notions such as “suffering,” “victim,” or “violence.”

Goltermann has convincingly argued that, for example, until the 1970s, psychiatrists and criminologists always associated the term “victim” with an individual “co-responsibility” or a negative, for example, “neurotic” “personality structure” and that, consequently, “victim” was a negatively connoted term even after 1945, including in regard to the survivors of Nazi extermination camps. She shows that the figure of the completely passive and innocent victim was only established as an attractive subject position in the Western world with the introduction of the diagnosis of the so-called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in the

¹¹ Sarasin, “Visualisierung des Feindes.”

¹² Burke, *History of Knowledge?*, 33; cf. Haraway, *Situated Knowledge*.

¹³ Bloor, *Knowledge and Social Imagery*.

¹⁴ See, for instance, Rheinberger, *History of Epistemic Things*.

¹⁵ Scott, “Evidence of Experience,” 384.

¹⁶ Chartier, “Monde comme représentation.”

1980s. This is an example of how even such seemingly timeless concepts as “victims,” but also “violence” or the notion of which forms of vulnerability and suffering deserve special attention and which do not, are shaped by specific knowledge of, for example, psychiatrists or jurists. Especially “trauma,” as Goltermann has shown, has become a term that “must” be used by asylum seekers or victims of racist violence in apartheid South Africa in order to justify a claim for compensation.¹⁷

In other words, such a perspective suggests that we, as historians, start to ask questions about how, in a given historical moment, people interpreted their—*real*—world, what kind of knowledge(s) organized these interpretations, and how these interpretations in turn influenced and, as always, slightly changed the respective orders of knowledge. That is to say, evidently, the History of Knowledge is more than just another specialty. It seems evident to me that there cannot be many historical events, situations, and structures that do *not* need to be interpreted by the people who have been confronted with them. And there are hardly any historical situations in which people are not exposed to media, religious teaching, albeit in the most modest way (e.g. through images in churches), political ideologies, or some kind of school education—in short, exposed to forms of knowledge. Therefore, and since we are unable to look into people’s minds and read their alleged true and “deepest” motives (if there were any at all), the History of Knowledge probably offers a “proxy” for learning why people behaved, spoke, and acted one way or another in the past. Yes, it is a “proxy,” but it might be the best instrument we have.

One last point, however, might come as a surprise. It concerns the question whether the term “knowledge” remains unaffected by our own, personal understanding of “knowledge,” and therefore can be a neutral, transcultural, and transhistorical instrument of research. I doubt this. For not only did our interest in “knowledge” go hand-in-hand with the rise of the so-called “knowledge society” (so coined, if I am correct, in Daniel Bell’s *The Coming of Post-industrial Society*, 1973), and is therefore obviously influenced by a historically specific concept of knowledge as a primary means of production. But our understanding of “knowledge” also seems inevitably touched by our position as academics, probably Westerners, relying on specific forms of rationality not only in doing our research but also in our daily lives. Take, for instance, the case of the Hindu cosmological worldview claiming that the order and the forces of the universe somehow are present and mirrored in our (higher) consciousness to which we might get access through meditation. This basic concept has been transferred to the West in many ways, especially since the 1970s, for instance, by Fritjof Capra’s *Tao of Physics* (1975), in the context of the so-called “Personal Growth Movement” of the 1970s, somehow implicitly by humanistic psychology, and last but not least in George Lucas’ blockbuster movie “Star Wars” (“May the Force be with you!,” 1977), and it has become a fundamental discursive pattern of Western esotericism ever since.

Hence, we would certainly, following Peter Burke’s example, respectfully speak of a Hindu “order of knowledge.” But to be honest: Would we really speak of “knowledge” when it comes to esotericism or, to make my point clearer, when esotericism leads to conspiracy theories? I guess we would hesitate. To deal with this kind of unease, I propose that although “knowledge” is a powerful catch-everything term, we should accept that our understanding of knowledge is minted at least by a basic, “garden variety” form of rationality, evidence, and arguments—and that we have to distinguish it, empirically and only for heuristic purposes, from belief systems. This distinction, of course, is historically and systematically highly volatile, in no way clear-cut, and by itself an important topic of research. There is no question that we can (and should) investigate, for instance, conspiracy theories and the like with all the *tools* the History of Knowledge provides. But this does not mean that we should feel compelled to baptize even blatant irrationality “knowledge.”

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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¹⁷ Goltermann, *Opfer*.

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