

FORUM

Response

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Today, what might be called “knowledge studies” are flourishing in a number of disciplines.¹ They are also becoming institutionalized. They have their own centers, in Berlin, for instance, in Zurich, in Augsburg, and recently in Cambridge, now home to the Centre for Global Knowledge Studies. They have their own journals, such as *Knowledge in Society* (1988–), the *Revue d’anthropologie des connaissances* (2006–) and *KNOW: A Journal on the Formation of Knowledge* (2017–).

Like their colleagues in sociology, anthropology, economics, and geography, historians have been contributing to this trend since the 1990s, if not before. However, the state of the field today is very different from its state when I entered it thirty years ago. In the 1990s, the volume of secondary literature on early modern European knowledge was almost manageable. Today, the volume of publications in that area alone is overwhelming. As for institutionalization, collective programs for the study of the history of knowledge are in place in Berlin, Lund, Oxford, Zurich, and Washington, DC, while in the year 2019 alone at least six conferences—held in Athens, Lund, Oslo, Paris, Washington, DC, and Zeist—took the history of knowledge as their theme.

One reason for giving *The Journal of the History of Knowledge* a warm welcome is that it will make it easier for a variety of workers in a field that is divided (to continue the agricultural metaphor) into many “strips” to discover what their neighbors are doing. Another is that it will offer a forum for debate—about topics, concepts, methods, and also the relation of history to other disciplines that take knowledge as one of their objects of study. The debate has already begun, but more voices need to be heard.²

I agree with so much in the four papers to which I have been asked to respond that “conversation” may be a more appropriate term than “debate.” These comments and reflections are organized around three well-known questions: What is the history of knowledge? How can it be studied? Where should we go from here?

What is the History of Knowledge?

This question immediately raises a much bigger one. What is knowledge? Are we or should we be trying to write the history of information, erudition, science, or wisdom? All these things, surely—and there is a case for adding the term “prudence” to the list—whether we are thinking about ancient Greece, when Aristotle discussed *phronesis*, about the sixteenth century, when the humanist Justus Lipsius viewed *prudencia* as a major goal of educational travel, or about our own time, when Bent Flyvberg argues that “applied phronesis” is the goal of what he calls “real social science.”³ Historians have made various choices related to the culture they come from. North Americans, for example, living in a culture of pragmatism, prefer the term information.⁴ The German tradition emphasizes *Wissenschaft*, not so much “science” as academic knowledge in general, formerly known as *Gelahrtheit*.⁵ Hence, I heartily agree with Marwa Elshakry’s rejection of a “singular” history of knowledge, preferring the idea of “knowledges” in the plural—shorthand for what

¹ Good introductions include: Adell, *Anthropologie des savoirs*; and Livingstone, *Science in its Place*. For a short guide to a large field, see Camic, “Sociology of Knowledge.”

² Recent valuable contributions to the debate include Lässig, “History of Knowledge”; Daston, “History of Science”; and Marchand, “How Much Knowledge?”

³ Flyvberg, Landman, and Schram, *Real Social Science*.

⁴ Chandler and Cortada, *Nation Transformed*; Darnton, “Early Information Society”; Berry, *Japan in Print*; Soll, *Information Master*; Cortada, *All the Facts*; Blair et al., *Information*.

⁵ Bödeker, Reill, and Schlumbohm, *Wissenschaft als Kulturelle Praxis*; Brocke, *Wissenschaftsgeschichte und Wissenschaftspolitik*; Bruch, Gerhardt, and Pawliczek, *Kontinuitäten und Diskontinuitäten*.

are variously called orders of knowledge, systems of knowledge, cultures of knowledge, communities of knowledge, or *savoirs-mondes*.⁶ How these systems come into being and how they are reconstructed over the long term are unavoidable questions for historians of knowledges.

It has been observed more than once that the concept of “knowledge” is uncomfortably vague or “baggy.” In this respect it resembles the much-criticized concept of “culture,” which has proved remarkably difficult to replace, perhaps because we need it in order to discuss connections between different activities. All the same, Johan Östling and David Larsson Heidenblad are surely right to ask the more pragmatic question: How is the history of knowledge distinguished from older enterprises?⁷ These enterprises include not only the history of the natural sciences but also the more recent history of the social sciences and the still more recent history of the humanities, advocated by Rens Bod in this issue.⁸

One answer to the question is that the history of knowledge is more inclusive than those histories—but so, of course, is intellectual history. Is the difference between the two enterprises a difference in label or a difference in substance? They obviously overlap, but at the very least the focus varies between—to take an early example—Condorcet’s *Esquisse d’un tableau historique des progrès de l’esprit humain*, on one side, focusing on the development of the human mind over the centuries, and, on the other, William Robertson’s *Historical Disquisition concerning the Knowledge which the Ancients had of India*, where the central interest of the author was in the information available to ancient Greeks and Romans. Emphasizing a distinctive program for the history of knowledge, Philipp Sarasin’s idea of the three pillars is an excellent one, and I accept his suggestion that I did not place enough weight on his third pillar, “the materiality and mediality of knowledge,” a point well made by the anthropologist Jack Goody in his various studies of orality and literacy.⁹

I also agree with my co-contributors to this issue that we should practice *Wissensgeschichte* as well as *Wissenschaftsgeschichte*, studying not only academic knowledges but other forms of knowledge—everyday, popular, indigenous, practical, implicit—as well.¹⁰ Simone Lässig’s discussion of the role of the children of recent immigrants to the United States in transmitting to their parents the everyday knowledge of their new habitat offers a clear example of such an approach.¹¹ I welcome the recent rise of interest in the circulation of knowledges, noted by several contributors in this issue, especially the concern with two-way traffic central to the work of Kapil Raj, among others.¹²

On this central theme, two observations may be in order. The first is the need to study obstacles to the circulation of knowledge, from the relative lack of books in early medieval Europe to the delays in the circulation of news in sixteenth-century Russia. The second point is the need to consider not only the movement of knowledge but also its transformation, including its “cultural translation” from one order of knowledge into another. This process might be approached from two opposite points of view. What looks to the “translators” like successful appropriations may well appear to members of the culture translated as errors or misunderstandings. A similar point might be made about the “social translation” of knowledges between dominant and dominated groups in the same culture. The limits of translatability between orders of knowledge also need to be taken into account.

A more difficult question is whether we should or should not distinguish knowledges from belief systems. I understand Philipp Sarasin’s wish to exclude the occult, the paranoid, and the irrational in general, but I also remember that a major reason for the turn towards the history of knowledges by historians of the sciences was precisely because they were uncomfortable not only with the idea that knowledge in some periods and cultures was “scientific,” but also with the idea that it was “unscientific.” Having made the turn to knowledge partly in order to avoid a “Whig” history of science, it would be ironic indeed if historians were to adopt a similar approach to knowledges. But can we avoid this and still exclude, for example, what Frances Yates called “the occult philosophy”? Its systematicity (unlike the simple belief in a world conspiracy) is surely evidence of its rationality (as distinct from its truth). I am not arguing that all beliefs are of equal value, but simply that historians might be well advised to follow Edmund Husserl’s method of “bracketing,” suspending judgment about the validity of competing knowledges. They need to consider whatever counts as knowledge in the culture or period they are studying whatever their own view of it may be.

⁶ Elshakry, “Beyond a Singular History,” this issue. On the last of the terms, see González-Bernaldo and Hilaire-Pérez, *Savoirs-mondes*.

⁷ Östling and Larsson, “Fulfilling the Promise,” this issue.

⁸ Bod, “Pandora’s Box,” this issue.

⁹ Sarasin, “More Than Another Specialty,” this issue; Goody, *Domestication*.

¹⁰ Greyerz, Flubacher, and Senn, *Wissenschaftsgeschichte*.

¹¹ Lässig, “History of Knowledge,” 29–31.

¹² Raj, *Relocating Modern Science*.

How should we study the history of knowledges?

New approaches inevitably raise new problems, most obviously that of finding sources. In the case of implicit knowledges, sources are difficult but not impossible to discover. Some enterprising anthropologists have apprenticed themselves to artisans, one of them to a smith in Mali, while another helped to build a minaret in Yemen. These experiences taught them something of the ways in which traditional craft knowledges are transmitted in the present (which has become the recent past, since the smith's apprentice carried out his fieldwork in the 1970s).¹³

Historians of earlier periods have to look for alternative methods. For example, they can learn from archaeologists to study artefacts for clues about the way in which they were made, in other words to discover the know-how current in a given period. Colin Renfrew and his colleagues preach and practice what they call "cognitive archaeology," ranging from what used to be called "prehistory" to our own time.¹⁴ A metaphor when Michel Foucault coined the phrase, the "archaeology of knowledge" has taken on a literal meaning as well.

The second method (ideally combined with the first, as in the hands-on approach of the early modernist, Pamela Smith), is to study written instructions for making things. In this case, the sixteenth century may be a privileged moment, at least in Europe, since it was the moment of the textualization of a number of knowledgeable practices in a series of how-to-do-it books ranging from cooking to architecture.¹⁵ First attempts to put knowledge into writing may tell historians more than later ones because texts of this kind may be following earlier texts rather than translating experience into instructions.

The history of practical knowledges outside the crafts has so far attracted less attention from historians, although printed guides to the art of commerce, for instance, the art of navigation, the art of diplomacy, and the art of travel all go back to the early modern period, while in the case of the art of politics, one how-to-do it book has become world-famous—Machiavelli's *The Prince*. The challenge to historians is to go beyond the general instructions offered in these handbooks and examine the place of knowledge in decision-making in different domains. For example, the massive and growing literature on eighteenth-century *Staatswissenschaft* offers a sharp contrast to the lack of studies of the place of knowledge in informing actual policies.¹⁶ Historians of war might place more emphasis on military intelligence as well as asking whether a given commander possessed reliable maps of the terrain in which his troops were operating, or knew whether the opposing army was bigger or smaller than his own. It is notorious that French generals lacked maps of their own country during the Prussian invasion in 1870. Following their defeat, the French government paid more attention to the teaching of geography in schools.¹⁷

Informed decision-making is also crucial in the attribution of works of art to particular artists, otherwise known as "connoisseurship" (a term that suggests that this activity was once regarded as knowledge *par excellence*). The changing evaluations of the paintings of Leonardo da Vinci become more intelligible when we learn which of his works were known or believed to be by him at any given time. Leonardo was placed only eleventh in a list of the best artists by the famous eighteenth-century French critic Roger de Piles, but this judgment was made before the portraits of Ginevra de' Benci and Cecilia Gallerani resurfaced and the connoisseurs Karl and Ernst von Liphart identified the Uffizi *Annunciation* and the Hermitage *Madonna* as works by the master.¹⁸

As in the case of the history of craftsmanship, sources for other practical knowledges are often difficult to find, but commercial letters or political reports like the ones that Venetian envoys used to present to the Senate bring us at least a little closer to the decision-making process. In similar fashion, just as surviving sketches for a painting or variants of a poem allow later scholars to glimpse the process of creation, so a focus on the ways in which notes taken in the field differ from the later publications based on them may throw light on the making of individual knowledges.¹⁹

An important point raised by Elshakry is that of taking seriously what she calls "vernacular classifications of knowledge." The problem is a general one, not only for historians but also for anthropologists, who have often discussed the difference between "emic" perspectives, from inside the group studied, and "etic" perspectives, from outside it. In my opinion, it is necessary for historians of knowledge—like historians in general—to take both viewpoints into account, moving backwards and forwards between them in order

¹³ McNaughton, *Mande Blacksmiths*; Marchand, *Minaret Building and Apprenticeship*.

¹⁴ Malafouris and Renfrew, *Cognitive Life of Things*.

¹⁵ Leong, *Recipes and Everyday Knowledge*; Smith, *Body of the Artisan*; Bell, *How to Do It*.

¹⁶ Lindenfeld, *Practical Imagination*; Garner, *État, économie et territoire*; Laborier et al., *Sciences camerales*.

¹⁷ Howard, *Franco-Prussian War*, 70–71.

¹⁸ On attributions in "situations of relative uncertainty," see Lahire, *Not Just a Painting*, 27–30.

¹⁹ The taking of notes has already become a major concern of some historians of knowledge: Blair, "Rise of Note-Taking."

to produce an account that is both faithful to the ideas of the inhabitants of the “foreign country” known as the past and intelligible to those of us who live in the present. In this respect, historians walk a similar tightrope to translators from one language into another.

Where do we go from here?

Östling and Heidenblad have two recommendations for the 2020s: to focus on “knowledge in society” and on “knowledge in people’s lives.” I have already welcomed the second approach, the relatively new emphasis on everyday knowledge and everyone’s knowledge. The first approach, on the other hand, has been practiced for decades.

My own suggestion for the 2020s is to pay more attention to ignorance or *Nicht-Wissen*, which has been explored for some time by economists and sociologists, and more recently by anthropologists, political scientists, and historians.²⁰ The decision-making discussed in the previous section necessarily takes place in situations of imperfect knowledge, as in the cases of businessmen unaware of the plans of their competitors or generals attempting to guess what is happening on what the Duke of Wellington called “the other side of the hill.” And so, just as historians of memory need to study forgetting and historians of language to study silence, historians of knowledge need to pay attention to the negative side of their subject, the dark side: ignorance as well as knowledge, disorder as well as order, misunderstanding as well as understanding, mistranslation and untranslatability as well as translation.

Ignorance is sometimes willful, as in the case of deniers of the Holocaust or global heating. More often it is unconscious, taking the form of what has been described as “meta-ignorance,” defined as “not knowing that one does not know.”²¹ I never thought I would agree with Donald Rumsfeldt about anything, but his famous distinction between “known unknowns” and “unknown unknowns” offers a preliminary orientation in this field, which is likely to be cultivated more intensively in the near future.²²

Most suggestions for the immediate future extrapolate from existing trends. What about a more distant future? We can only speculate, but speculating about this known unknown may heighten awareness of alternative paths ahead and so assist our choices. There may, for instance, be more interest in theory. My book, *What Is the History of Knowledge?* has been faulted for failing to offer readers a theory, which leads to the question of what counts as a theory in this case. Remembering a famous course taught at the University of Sussex in the 1960s, “Concepts, Methods and Theories in the Social Sciences,” it may be useful to distinguish these three elements. Methods have already been discussed in this response. As for concepts, I have certainly borrowed from Michel Foucault, as Sarasin has noted, though I believe that I am equally indebted to Pierre Bourdieu and even more to Karl Mannheim.

Whether we also need theories, in the sense of a general proposition or a cluster or system of such propositions, I am less sure. Marxist historians would presumably admit to using a theory, one that offers them valuable insights at the price of inhibiting other insights. The attraction of Mannheim, at least for me, is that he was both close to and distant from Marxism, so much so that non-Marxists thought he was a follower of Marx while Marxists thought he was not. Is there an alternative theory available? Only one occurs to me and that is Thomas Kuhn’s theory of the “structure” of scientific revolutions, a cyclical theory that focuses on four stages of development—old paradigm, awareness of discrepancies, crisis, and a revolution that establishes a new paradigm. Could this model (not to say “paradigm”) be employed for thinking about the history of knowledge in general?

I admit to having been tempted in this direction, thinking in particular about Columbus who began his voyage believing in the paradigm of three continents. He experienced serious discrepancies as he sailed on, a crisis that was solved when the paradigm was modified to include “America.” Again, like the late Georg Iggers and others, I view Ranke’s “historical revolution” as a change of paradigm.²³ In this case, however, the explanation of the revolution does not fit Kuhn’s paradigm of a paradigm since Ranke was not responding to discrepancies or discoveries. It would be more exact to say that what he did was to generalize earlier practices of source criticism.

This example suggests that a model of change formulated in the context of one discipline may not work well for the history of others. It leads to a more general conclusion that readers may find either disturbing or

²⁰ Moore and Tumin, “Social Functions of Ignorance”; Hayek, “Coping with Ignorance”; Wehling, *Schatten des Wissens?*; Dilley, “Reflections on Knowledge Practices”; Zwierlein, *Dark Side of Knowledge*.

²¹ Smithson, “Ignorance and Science,” 135.

²² Jajdelska, “Unknown Unknowns.”

²³ Iggers, “Crisis of Rankean Paradigm”; Burke, “Paradigms Lost.”

stimulating. It may be time for emancipation from the history of science paradigm, valuable as it has been in the past. Historians of knowledge are in debt to historians of the natural sciences for calling attention to spaces, circulation, and practices, all of which are important in the history of the humanities and the social sciences as well. All the same, there is a danger of the history of knowledges being viewed as a residual category, if not a poor relation, in a field that is becoming known in French as “sciences et savoirs,” as in the case of the enterprise in which Stéphane Van Damme recently participated.²⁴ Should we free ourselves from the dominance of the historians of the natural sciences? Can we? Will we?

Future historians of knowledge will have a choice between two paths. The first path, common in the history of academic disciplines in the last two centuries or so, is the path of autonomy—a field turning into a sub-discipline and then into a fully-fledged discipline with its own centers, journals, chairs, and departments. This has been the path taken by historians of science. The second path, which I must say I think more appropriate for historians of knowledge, is to follow historians of culture and so infiltrate other kinds of history: economic, social, political, and so on. Like culture, knowledge does not include everything, yet it can be found everywhere. In common with my co-contributors, I firmly believe that the history of knowledges needs to be integrated into general history, *histoire totale*.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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²⁴ Pestre, *Sciences et savoirs*. See also Van Damme, “Practices, Places and Materiality,” this issue.

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