

FORUM

Forum: What is the History of Knowledge?

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You are reading the inaugural issue of the *Journal for the History of Knowledge*. Its founding follows the recent surge in initiatives around the history of knowledge. The last few years have seen the establishment of book series such as Knowledge Societies in History (Routledge), Studies in the History of Knowledge (Amsterdam University Press), and Global Epistemics (Rowman and Littlefield International), new journals such as *KNOW: A Journal on the Formation of Knowledge* (University of Chicago Press), older journals devoting special issues to the history of knowledge, including *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte* in 2019 among others, and the foundation of new research centers, such as the Zentrum für Wissensgeschichte in Zürich, the Berlin Center for the History of Knowledge (a joint initiative of the universities in Berlin and the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science), and, since March 2020, the Lund Centre for the History of Knowledge.¹

Will 2020 mark the beginning of the era of the history of knowledge? For all the rhetoric of novelty, the field in fact has roots in several existing traditions in different countries and in different languages. These include *Wissenschaftsgeschichte* in Germany and Switzerland, *histoire des savoirs* in France, and *idéhistoria* in Sweden and Scandinavia more broadly. Remarkably, these different traditions have rarely been in touch with each other and seldom exchanged their findings and approaches across the boundaries of national and linguistic traditions until the recent discipline-building initiatives cited above. In this inaugural issue, we therefore bring together representatives of these various traditions to exchange their views on the history of knowledge.

We have argued elsewhere that the history of knowledge is more than a mere expansion of the history of science and offered our own views on what it can and should be.² In this forum we have asked the question "What is the history of knowledge?" to several active practitioners with a background in one of the different traditions. Philipp Sarasin is one of the founders of the Zentrum für Wissensgeschichte in Zürich. Johan Östling and David Larsson Heidenblad co-founded the Lund Centre for the History of Knowledge and represent the Nordic tradition in the field. Stéphane Van Damme is steeped in the French traditions around *histoire des savoirs*, some of them in turn drawing on other currents. It has been argued that the history of science needs to expand to the history of knowledge in order to make room for the history of humanities. Rens Bod is one of the driving forces behind the establishment of the latter field, and as one of the directors of the Vossius Center for the History of Humanities and Sciences in Amsterdam, he represents this trend, strongly present in the Netherlands. Another element in the making of the new field of the history of knowledge is its move away from Eurocentrism to encapsulate other cultures and global movements of knowledge. We have invited Marwa Elshakry, a leading global historian of science, to reflect on the opportunities offered by the history of knowledge.

In 2015, one of the main protagonists of the history of knowledge in the English-language world, Peter Burke, formulated—for the first time to the best of our knowledge—a response to our central question in a book with the same title.³ Therefore, we have asked him to comment on the contributions to this forum.

¹ For an overview of the new institutions see Östling, Larsson Heidenblad, and Nilsson Hammar, *Forms of Knowledge*.

² Dupré and Somsen, "History of Knowledge."

³ Burke, *History of Knowledge?*

This forum does not provide definitive answers, perhaps not even a consensus or unity in diversity. Rather, it provides directions for travel to the future of the history of knowledge and hopefully some glimpses of the ways in which this journal can contribute to this emerging field.

Competing Interests

The authors wrote this introduction in their capacity of editors-in-chief of the Journal for the History of Knowledge.

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