



Book Review

Johan Östling, David Larsson
Heidenblad and Anna Nilsson
Hammar (eds.)

*Forms of Knowledge: Developing the
History of Knowledge*

Lund: Nordic Academic Press
2020, 304 pp.

F*orms of Knowledge* is the latest publication to emerge from the History of Knowledge group at Lund University and comprises essays developed from a series of workshops held by the group in 2018 and 2019. While the editors acknowledge that the essays in this volume primarily showcase the activities and interests of scholars primarily based at Lund, they also express the hope that they will contribute to “international discussions on the history of knowledge and demonstrate the field’s potential to enrich historical scholarship” (p. 9).

In their Introduction to the volume, the editors make a convincing case for the history of knowledge understood “as an umbrella term, bringing together researchers with different backgrounds and research interests in a joint conversation” (p. 10–11). As such, *Forms of Knowledge* may be seen as another contribution to a growing call for the adoption of a more thorough history of knowledge approach. It sets out some of the important advantages of such an approach, in particular, the challenge it poses to both disciplinary and chronological parochialism. They advocate rightly for its integrative capacity, drawing together areas of society and culture which have been artificially separated in the past.

The essays themselves are divided into three sections, focusing respectively on “Expanding the Field,” “Examining Key Concepts” and “Setting Knowledge in Motion.” It is refreshing to see all of the contributors, without exception, engaging critically with the concept of knowledge and situating themselves and their contributions within this emerging field. In this sense, despite very different focuses, there is a feeling of coherence in terms of a shared research agenda, which is something often lacking in edited collections. I very much share the hope of both editors and contributors that the history of knowledge has the potential to be both “integrative and generative” (p. 14).

For this hope to be fulfilled, however, there needs to be greater clarity about precisely what the history of knowledge is and, as the editors themselves comment, “whether the field provides anything substantially new” (p. 10). Part of the challenge lies in what Staffan Bergwik and Linn Holmberg in their Concluding Reflections describe as “the vagueness of key analytical concepts” (p. 290). While it is true that a certain flexibility, even “vagueness” can be productive in challenging long-established boundaries and bringing together researchers from different fields, there is, at the same time, an equal, if not greater risk, that important differences and distinctions will be elided. As Bergwik and Holmberg correctly observe, “If there is little coherence in the idea of what is studied, to what degree can researchers build on or connect to one another’s results?” (p. 290) As they continue, the key question is surely, “What does

it add to our historical understanding to study carpentry skills—or religious ritual, public opinion, awareness of contemporary events, or the ability to find your way home—as knowledge rather than as ideas, practices, or capacities?” (p. 291) For the history of knowledge to function as the integrative and generative umbrella term the editors hope for, there needs to be greater clarity about what “knowledge” means. I would support (as Bergwik and Holmberg do) Lorraine Daston’s recommendation to concentrate here on privileged and “systematized ideas and skills” (p. 287).

The volume, as whole, but the Introduction, in particular, would have benefitted from a more thorough engagement and acknowledgement of previous work already carried out to develop a critical and culturally situated history of knowledge in a number of different fields. While the editors acknowledge the importance of previous work in “German and Swiss *Wissensgeschichte*” which “emerged in the early 2000s,” they claim that “it has only been in the late 2010s that [the history of knowledge] has become a truly international and multilingual endeavour” (p. 9). Such a statement risks overlooking important, decades-long work in the history of science by scholars like Steven Shapin, Jan Golinski, Lorraine Daston and many others. As Bergwik and Holmberg point out in their Concluding Reflections in a section appropriately titled “Engaging with what is already known,” “what counts as knowledge in a given historical context, and how hierarchies and orderings of knowledge emerge and change, have been basic research questions for historians of science for many decades” (p. 292). And not just in the history of science. Scholars working in the sociology of science, history of ideas, intellectual history, cultural history,

historical geography and many other adjacent fields have been developing a critical “history of knowledge” agenda for many years (see, e.g., Daston 2017; 2019). In the field of historical geography, for example, there is now a well-established body of research into historical mobilities of knowledge which includes theoretically and conceptually sophisticated work on the notion of the “circulation of knowledge” (see, for example, Meusberger et al., 2017; Glückler et al., 2017).

The decision to include the critical commentary at the end of the volume is laudable as it shows the editors’ willingness to engage in dialogue with other scholars and to have the strengths and limitations of their work analysed within the context of wider scholarship. However, as there are some significant gaps identified by Bergwik and Holmberg, both in terms of the analytical concepts employed and the extent to which editors and authors engage with existing scholarship, I am left wondering why the editors did not take the opportunity to redraft the framing of the essays in light of this critique. This would have made the volume as a whole stronger and more useful. It would also, crucially, have helped to fulfil the important aim which the editors articulate in their Introduction, namely to develop the history of knowledge as a field of inquiry.

References

- Daston, Lorraine. “The History of Science and the History of Knowledge.” *Know: A Journal on the Formation of Knowledge* 1, no. 1 (2017), 131–54.
- Daston, Lorraine. “History of Knowledge – Comment.” In *Debating New Approaches to History*, edited by Marek Tamm and Peter Burke, 173–78. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019.

Meusberger, Peter, Heike Jöns and Michael Heffernan, eds. *Mobilities of Knowledge*. Cham: Springer, 2017.

Glückler, Johannes, Emmanuel Lazega and Ingmar Hammer, eds. *Knowledge and Networks*. Cham: Springer, 2017.

Heather Ellis
Co-editor of History of Education
University of Sheffield
h.l.ellis@sheffield.ac.uk