

Forms of knowledge: developing the history of knowledge*Edited by Johan Östling, David Larsson Heidenblad and Anna Nilsson Hammar*

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In recent years, a group of historians at Lund University, Sweden, has emerged as among the most active practitioners and proponents of the new and developing field of the history of knowledge. *Forms of Knowledge* is the group's second major English-language edited collection, following *Circulation of Knowledge* (Nordic Academic Press, 2018), and coincides with the formalisation of its activities as the Lund Centre for the History of Knowledge, which was established in early 2020. The collection's editors and most of its contributors are based at Lund, with the rest drawn from other Swedish and Danish universities.

The history of knowledge has developed in several centres in Europe and the United States, out of and in connection with a number of other subdisciplines, including the history of science, the history of ideas, the history of the book, and cultural history. It also intersects with the similarly nascent field of the history of the humanities. As Johan Östling, David Larsson Heidenblad and Anna Nilsson Hammar note in the introduction to the present collection, the history of knowledge has both integrative and generative capacities, bringing scholars from various fields into dialogue in ways that cut across traditional subdisciplinary boundaries and chronological specialisms, while also generating new questions and problems. While still diverse in methods and approaches, and indeed in its conceptualisation of "knowledge", the field has in general meant a reorientation towards knowledge as an object as such, to its processes of circulation and translation, its mediality and materiality. For the history of science this means a somewhat broader object of study than that of "science"; for other fields such as traditional forms of intellectual history it means a shift away from highly textual, close reading methods and more focus upon the operation of knowledge in society and its functions in people's everyday lives. For some scholars these developments provide means of describing forms of informal, extra-institutional or historically denigrated forms of knowledge that are not well captured by traditional subdisciplines' conceptualisations of their objects. For others it represents a suite of new methods and concepts with which to approach old topics.

Forms of Knowledge arrives at a time when the field is starting to move beyond initial programmatic statements and into more developed empirical studies. Its 15 short chapters cover a range of ground including the development of the category of "conventional wisdom"; the official promotion of knowledge of the potato in mid-18th-century Sweden; Aristotelian *phronesis* or practical knowledge gained by experience in the history of psychiatry; and the ways in which historical narratives are shaped on Wikipedia. Nordic topics predominate, but there are also chapters exploring German, Spanish, American and Ottoman histories, frequently with an emphasis on transnational connections between multiple national or imperial contexts. Often the chapters are rather too brief to do justice to their topics, and the reader is left with a sense of having glimpsed just the tip of the iceberg. Whereas *Circulation of Knowledge* comprised a diverse set of short studies under the banner of the concept of



“circulation”, *Forms of Knowledge* is more open-ended in its organisation, in a sense working the opposite way around, with the chapters each contributing to the broader history of knowledge field whatever transferable concepts are most pertinent to their individual empirical cases. This is a more promising approach, supporting more organic connections between case studies and general concepts.

Theoretical implications are most pronounced in a middle section of five chapters on “Examining key concepts”, but sectional divisions are rather notional and numerous wider implications for the field – or, in some cases, prospectively destabilising the field – spill out of the chapters in various ways throughout. For instance, Larsson Heidenblad’s chapter on the growth and circulation of financial knowledge outside of formal institutions in the late 20th century concludes with an outline of a prospective future research agenda (pp. 54–55). The contributors do not all agree on what the field should be or even whether “history of knowledge” is a useful construction. In the most microhistorical chapter in the volume, on his late grandmother’s recipe book, Peter K. Andersson worries about the meaningfulness of the idea of knowledge circulating. Andersson suggests that it is rather information that circulates, and knowledge is instead “something that arises within an individual when they have absorbed information” (p. 69). As Björn Lundberg notes elsewhere (p. 144), there are semantic dimensions to such definitional problems that depend on the language of scholarship.

What might *Forms of Knowledge* have to offer historians of education? Although educational institutions, systems and policies all have obvious implications for knowledge and its roles in society and in people’s lives, the history of education has not yet been well represented within the mixture of different fields that have fed into the history of knowledge. There is however evidence that this is changing, with increasing dialogue between the two. Three chapters in the present volume touch on established history of education topics. Two by Martin Ericsson and Maria Simonsen cover aspects of UNESCO’s post-war public education programmes. A third, by Lise Groesmeyer, the longest and arguably the standout chapter in the collection, tells an engaging story of changing interpretations of German and Austrian academic and scholarly émigrés who fled the Nazi regime for the United States. The significance of the framing of these as history of knowledge topics is principally methodological, with each approached somewhat differently than might be conventional within the history of education. Simonsen, for instance, is concerned with UNESCO’s activities around women’s and girls’ education, but surveys these activities through their representations in the UNESCO publication the *Courier*; Groesmeyer’s method is to examine the changing historiography of the émigrés and the social functions of the different conceptual lens through which they have been seen.

The volume concludes with an appraisal and critique of the book’s contribution by Staffan Bergwik and Linn Holmberg, both scholars in the Swedish tradition of *idéhistoria* (history of science and ideas) at Stockholm University. This is included, according to the editors’ introduction, in order to “widen the perspective” and defuse the potential for parochialism risked by a volume so tightly focused on the work of a single research group (p. 23). Bergwik and Holmberg’s critique, which cuts surprisingly deep, takes as its starting point the question of whether the history of knowledge should conceptualise itself as a loose “umbrella term” for interdisciplinary studies of knowledge in the past, or as an “incipient subdiscipline with a specific character” (p. 285). While the looser formulation, with its strong receptiveness to interdisciplinary dialogue, has supported the history of knowledge’s fruitfully “integrative” qualities, it can also present potential problems in a resulting vagueness of key analytical concepts, and for the capacities of researchers in different subfields to build upon one another’s work. Bergwik and Holmberg also charge that in framing knowledge as a broad social phenomenon, the field has not engaged sufficiently with the rich conceptual developments in the history of science over recent decades regarding ways of understanding “society” and the places within it of scientific knowledge. Whatever the merits of these

criticisms (I sympathise with some of them, less so with others), it is notable that they all circle around the disciplinary or interdisciplinary character of the history of knowledge, its relations with cognate fields – especially, in the Swedish context, *idéhistoria* – and its rhetorical self-positioning through disciplinary boundary-work. The field remains caught between the necessity of claiming its distinctiveness and novelty, and its capacity to draw strength from integrative interdisciplinarity while also needing to pay its intellectual debts. These problems are necessarily political, and themselves ones in the formation of knowledge. They are questions for historians of education to watch for as the history of knowledge develops a fuller connection with the history of education.

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