

Kaleidoscopic Knowledge. On Jewish and Other Encyclopedias in Modernity

Workshop at the Simon Dubnow Institute, Leipzig

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Since the onset of the modern era, if not before, the encyclopedia has functioned as a medium infusing communities with a sense of self-assurance and identity. Down into the present, characterized by a seemingly planetary hyper-medial networking of knowledge, the encyclopedia has proven itself to be attractive for negotiating a consciousness of collective belonging. People always turn in particular to this genre in times of political upheaval and political changes which demand new social orientations. Precisely on the basis of this attempt to determine what is characteristically one's own, distinguished from what is Other, encyclopedias represent in a special and distinctive way the accumulated knowledge of their time. They inscribe a canon whose conditions of transformation can only be discerned from a great remove in time. Thus they offer researchers the possibility to explore the construction of images of Self and Other as shaped and determined by social forces, but above all to investigate them in their capacity for transformation. It is possible through encyclopedias to vividly illustrate the influences, processes of transformation and adaptation which the knowledge of a particular community is subject to.

"Jewish" encyclopedias arose in the 19th and early 20th centuries as a reaction to "general" encyclopedias, which for the most part were nonetheless strongly oriented to national cultures, and whose claim to universality functioned principally as a contrastive backdrop for showcasing their own respective national particularities and virtues. Like other encyclopedias explicitly oriented to culture or religion, the will was manifest in Jewish encyclopedias to establish one's own forum of cultural and religious representation, along with the need to defend oneself against prejudices in the majority societies.

The workshop will examine the development of Jewish and supposedly universal encyclopedias in the modern era from a cultural-historical perspective. One point of departure is the thesis that it is necessary to interrelate Jewish and general worlds of knowledge more closely than has previously been assumed. This assumption is grounded on the observation that Jewish knowledge became part of the general store of knowledge in and through processes of translation. Those processes can be manifested not only in the form of transfer of content, but also through overlapping among encyclopedia authors and editing staff. The Jewish textual tradition was likewise influenced by the cultures surrounding it. For that reason, it is

important to analyze the points of reference intrinsic within the transformations of the encyclopedia, and the cross-references to other realms of knowledge. Looking at the transfer of knowledge, the workshop will investigate (a) the actors and agents in encyclopedic undertakings, (b) the concrete conditions shaping the composition of their texts as a communication also molded by material interests, and (c) cross-section analyses of series of articles and texts. The aim is to uncover commonalities and lines of separation in traditions of knowledge and science which superficially appear to diverge; that will also be accomplished through a critical evaluation of the metaphors of this form of traditional codification and presentation of knowledge (atlas, mappemonde, organon).

Seen as a whole, one paradoxical feature of encyclopedic texts is of especial interest: namely the continual return of forms of thought and modes of knowledge which were deemed passé and outmoded. In contrast with other media, encyclopedic texts have a certain degree of persistence. That can be manifested, for example, in editions reissued over several decades without significant changes, portions of text taken from other encyclopedias, and an immanent reference to the genre. Is the encyclopedia then, we may ask, a kaleidoscope in textual form? Does it always order and array the same store of knowledge, albeit in new patterns? On the one hand, it is questionable to what extent the observation of ever recurring fragments of text is diametrically opposed to the proposed encyclopedic aim of generating a sense of collective belonging. On the other, it is an open question as to whether the formation of the same or similar knowledge has consequences for negotiating conceptions of value that are valid extending across boundaries. To what extent then is the encyclopedia a medium with whose aid concepts about a global order can be negotiated? One possibility for approaching this phenomenon is to search for models of the “encyclopedia” in areas outside Europe, but without subordinating these forms methodologically to the prototype from Europe, and without ignoring possible alterities.

Presentations should not exceed 20 minutes. Conference languages are English and German.

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