

POLITICAL CULTURE AND THE HISTORY OF KNOWLEDGE: ACTORS, INSTITUTIONS, PRACTICES

Conference at the German Historical Institute Washington, June 6–8, 2019. Conveners: Kerstin von der Krone, Simone Lässig (GHI), Kijan Espahangizi, Nils Güttler, Monika Wulz (Center “History of Knowledge” at the ETH Zurich and the University of Zurich), Shadi Bartsch-Zimmer (Stevanovich Institute on the Formation of Knowledge at the University of Chicago). Sponsored by the GHI, the Center “History of Knowledge” at the ETH Zurich and the University of Zurich, the Stevanovich Institute on the Formation of Knowledge at the University of Chicago, and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation). Participants: Gregory Afinogenov (Georgetown University), Ian P. Beacock (University of British Columbia), Martin Beddeleem (Aarhus University), Sarah Beringer (GHI), Jamie Cohen-Cole (George Washington University), Bregje F. van Eekelen (Technical University Delft), Elisabeth Engel (GHI), Fabian Grütter (ETH Zurich), Axel Jansen (GHI), Zoé Kergomard (GHI Paris), Oxana Kosenko (University of Ulm), Anne Kwaschik (University of Konstanz), Malcom Maclaren (University of Zurich), Suzanne Marchand (Louisiana State University), Bryan McAllister-Grande (Northeastern University), Benno Nietzel (Bielefeld University), Johan Östling (Lund University), Felix Römer (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin), Claudia Roesch (GHI), Anna Ross (University of Warwick), George Steinmetz (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor), Danielle Taschereau Mamers (University of Toronto), Jakob Tanner (University of Zurich), Anna von der Goltz (Georgetown University), Fei-Hsien Wang (Indiana University Bloomington), Richard Wetzell (GHI), Peter Wien (University of Maryland, College Park), Jens Wietschorke (University of Vienna / LMU Munich).

Recent political events on both sides of the Atlantic have brought into question the very idea of knowing and knowledge in the political realm. “Fake news,” “alternative facts” and “post-truth society” are only the most prominent catchwords of this debate that also saw the confidence in science and expert knowledge erode. A conference organized by the GHI in collaboration with the Center “History of Knowledge” at the ETH Zurich and the University of Zurich and the Stevanovich Institute on the Formation of Knowledge at the University of Chicago aimed to explore the category of knowledge in political history and political culture more broadly. By investigating the role of knowledge in politics, the conference fostered a transatlantic debate on the merits of using knowledge as a category of historical

analysis. Scholars working in the “history of knowledge” paradigm productively conversed with scholars in other fields — such as political history, cultural history, and intellectual history — who are open to using knowledge as a category of analysis. Both the director of the GHI, Simone Lässig, and the scientific coordinator of the Zurich Center “History of Knowledge,” Kijan Espahangizi, delivered welcome addresses. Kerstin von der Krone thanked all speakers for participating in the pre-conference blog series “Exploring Knowledge in Political History,” published on the GHI’s blog *History of Knowledge: Research, Resources, and Perspectives* (<https://historyofknowledge.net/series/poliknow/>).

The conference started with a panel on “Truth, Facts, and Populism,” issues that provided a link to current debates on politics and knowledge. In the first paper, Jens Wietschorke sketched a history of knowledge about “the popular” going back to the emergence of German “Volkskunde” at the beginning of the twentieth century. He argued that knowledge about “the common people” represented a strategy of distinction and self-legitimation by the educated classes and that it formed part of a tendency to culturalize social and economic inequalities in society. In his paper on the history of neoliberal epistemologies, Martin Beddeleem showed that initially, the competitive market was the ideal model for the emergence of objective knowledge. However, since the 1970s, more militant epistemic practices gained ground by promoting ignorance and doubt. He argued that this development fostered the emergence of present mistrust in science and public expertise. Jamie Cohen-Cole provided an intellectual history of post-truth politics emphasizing the discrepancy between the self-perception of left-liberal academics and the conservative perspective on postmodern constructivist discourses since the 1970s. While center-right accounts of knowledge claimed to be objective and neutral, they discredited the postmodern critique of practices such as IQ research on gender and racial differences as political and Marxist. In their comments, Simone Lässig and Monika Wulz both highlighted that the history of post-truth and populist knowledge is key to understanding competing and discriminatory strategies as part of political histories of knowledge.

Kerstin von der Krone introduced the public evening panel on knowledge, power, and political culture and highlighted the importance of a transatlantic conversation on the relation between history of knowledge and political history. Jakob Tanner’s and Suzanne

Marchard's keynote presentations opened up this conversation, followed by a discussion moderated by Anna von der Goltz. Drawing on the work of Marc Flandreau on the interrelation of academic knowledge and the stock exchange in the Victorian age as well as Philipp Mirowski's reflection on the complex relation of data, information, and knowledge, Jakob Tanner outlined how the "prism" of knowledge and its history could shed new light on economic history and vice versa. Suzanne Marchand, in turn, warned against using the term "political" too extensively without clear-cut restrictions of its meaning in concrete historical studies. She argued that knowledge must not be superimposed with power and that culture is not synonymous with politics. The following prolific discussion focused on the relation between knowledge and power, taking its economic and political dimensions into account as well as its oppressive and antagonistic aspects.

The second panel focused on expertise and education in relation to state politics. Benno Nietzel spoke about the role of psychologists in propaganda strategies underlying the hostile relations between Germany, Russia, and the United States during the Second World War. Bregje van Eekelen highlighted the expertise of creative thinking practices in the 1950s in academia, management, and the military. She argued that we must understand creativity as an institutionalized form of freedom that offered the opportunity for a depoliticized discourse during the Cold War. Bryan McAllister-Grande presented the knowledge culture of a group of Puritan-inspired Christian Humanists influential in U.S. academia in the 1930s. Relying on ancient knowledge and religion, they promoted both Christianity and Platonism as the highest forms of reason and emphasized the force of religious authority against the relativist crisis prominent at that time. Fei-Hsien Wang demonstrated the influence of Anglo-American textbooks on Chinese education reform around 1900. She argued that textbooks enforced the normalization of the Anglo-American knowledge order, making it more relevant than American business interests in the newly emerging regime of international intellectual property rights. Shadi Bartsch-Zimmer's comments compared the role of the humanities in the U.S. and China, which opened up a transnational perspective on the role of ancient history in early twentieth-century knowledge politics. For Johan Östling, history of knowledge is a field in which perspectives from cultural, global, political, and economic histories as well as from the histories of science, media, and infrastructure can cross-fertilize to develop a bigger and, at the same time, more nuanced picture of historical interrelations.

The third panel focused on theories and practices of knowledge “after crisis,” as Espahangizi’s comment later underscored. Malcolm Maclaren argued that the specific style of reasoning embodied in the League of Nations and its great faith in international law was a direct reaction to the devastating experience of the Great War. What might appear as overly optimistic from the viewpoint of later generations should rather be understood as a way of reinventing politics after total violence by means of international law through rational negotiation, reason, and knowledge. In his comment, Gregory Steinmetz reminded us not to forget the colonial context of the interwar period. Zoé Kergomard presented her results on the history of voter abstention in Switzerland in the second half of the twentieth century. She looked at the way this social phenomenon was analyzed and interpreted by political scientists, for example as a form of democratic “apathy” after the Second World War and as a form of alternative participation after the societal transformations of the 1960s and 1970s. Fabian Grütter argued that the study of knowledge itself was reinvented after the end of the boom era. In the material “wastelands” of the post-industrial society, a new pragmatic and small-scale epistemology emerged that shaped our current understanding of knowledge.

The role of knowledge in governance took center stage in the fourth panel. Gregory Afinogenov chronicled Russian information politics in the aftermath of the French Revolution. He sketched the counter-revolutionary reading culture in Russia around 1800 and argued that the circulation of political knowledge in journals independent from the state ultimately rallied the people behind the reactionary monarchist state itself. Anna Ross argued that statistics were a tool of state reform after the 1848 revolution in Germany. Through statistics, state authorities adopted revolutionary ideas which influenced their decision-making; statistics mediated between conservatives and oppositional democrats. Kerstin von der Krone’s related comment pointed to the role of state officials and civil actors as knowledge producers in this scenario. In presenting a history of knowledge about economic inequality in the United Kingdom of the 1980s under Thatcher, Felix Römer argued that contemporary knowledge about poverty resulted from a politics of ignorance in which statistical studies were cut back and the debate on poverty was marginalized. In her comment, Anne Kwaschik highlighted the integrative capacity of knowledge as an object of research bringing together aspects of social history, political history, and history of science in fields such as the histories of economics and of bureaucracies.

The fifth panel considered the links between knowledge, society, and social activism. First, Ian Beacock presented case studies of queer amateur historians in early-twentieth-century Germany who worked and published on the history of queer people. Studying the knowledge politics of pioneering gay and lesbian activists provided a fruitful entry point to reconstructing an early queer imagination from within, rather than from an external, medicalized perspective. Next, Oxana Kosenko described the various forms in which both the government and revolutionary activists in the Soviet Union publicized hygiene education between the 1920s and 1940s. Such “theatrical biopolitics” aimed at preparing the population for the new proletarian society. Sanitary knowledge and values were transmitted through different channels like public performances by traveling theater troupes, sanitary mock trials, and film productions. Finally, Danielle Taschereau Mamers analyzed racial taxonomies and practices of documenting “Indian” identity in the context of settler colonial politics of knowledge in Canada. In response to a comment from Richard Wetzell, she emphasized the active role of indigenous resistance against logics of epistemic othering. In the discussion following the panel, Peter Wien advocated moving beyond the dominant “Foucauldian-Gramscian paradigm” in the history of knowledge.

The final discussion of the conference, moderated by Axel Jansen, opened with concluding remarks from Simone Lässig, who highlighted the productive transatlantic dialogue between the histories of knowledge and of political culture. Co-convenor Bartsch-Zimmer picked up on an underlying methodological question raised by Espahangizi earlier in the conference: is it possible to write a history of knowledge as a merely descriptive history of knowledge *claims* that refrains from evaluating these claims? The case of political knowledge particularly highlights the problem of avoiding normative evaluation, even in the choice of one’s objects of research. Should propaganda be treated and analyzed as a form of knowledge? What is the political effect if a historian of knowledge were to do so? Then again, how can we deal with the normative dimension of the history of knowledge without falling into a Whiggish history of truths? The conference proved a fruitful framework for combining a wide variety of empirical case studies with a discussion of conceptual questions key to a political history of knowledge, or perhaps a knowledge history of political culture.

Kijan Espahangizi and Monika Wulz (Center “History of Knowledge” at the ETH Zurich and the University of Zurich)

