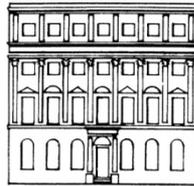


German Historical Institute
London



BULLETIN

ISSN 0269-8552

Susanne Friedrich:

Ignorance and Non-Knowledge in Early Modern Expansion

Conference Report

German Historical Institute London Bulletin, Vol 37, No. 2
(November 2015), pp122-127

Ignorance and Non-Knowledge in Early Modern Expansion, international Workshop organized by the German Historical Institute London and held at the GHIL, 24–25 Mar. 2015. Convener: Susanne Friedrich (LMU Munich).

Should the concepts of ignorance and non-knowledge be incorporated into studies of early modern European expansion? The answer given by the workshop 'Ignorance and Non-knowledge in Early Modern Expansion' was a clear yes. The two-day event aimed to shed light on particular cases, conceptualizations, and problems of research as well as on the relevance and functions of 'ignorance' and 'non-knowledge' more generally. In her introduction Susanne Friedrich (Munich) described the challenges and prospects of integrating these concepts into the investigation of early modern expansion. She stated that 'non-knowledge' and 'ignorance' can neither be conclusively defined nor easily accessed because of their covert nature. They are not simply the opposite of knowledge, but, rather, complementary to it. Relying on heuristic and methodological considerations, Friedrich distinguished between 'ignorance' and 'non-knowledge'. She argued that the former consists of passive forms of not knowing which can only be studied retrospectively, while the latter is active in nature, consisting of contemporary reflections. Using examples from the Dutch East India Company, Friedrich demonstrated that both had a considerable impact on the Company's knowledge culture. There was a structural deficit of knowledge, increased by distance and protracted communication-cycles. Non-knowledge was rated a threat, but also constituted a starting-point for projects, served as an argument in conflicts, and was even wilfully maintained. Furthermore, the classification of something as non-knowledge was not only a question of epistemology, but also closely connected to politics and social standing.

Subsequently, the sociologist Matthias Groß (Jena) gave an overview of the state of the art in sociological ignorance studies, complemented by examples from his own research. He distinguished four basic forms of ignorance, namely: *nescience* (ignorance which can only be discovered in hindsight); *general non-knowledge* (the acknowl-

The full conference programme can be found under Events and Conferences on the GHIL's website <www.ghil.ac.uk>.

edgement that things are unknown); *active/positive non-knowledge* (specified ignorance, integrated into planning and stimulating the acquisition of knowledge); and *passive/negative non-knowledge* (known, but reckoned unimportant or dangerous). Contrary to common perception, the unknown does not necessarily have to be seen as negative. When studying ignorance, one should be aware of the gap between the 'official' version propagated about an operation and 'real world' decision-making. While subsequent coverage maintains that decisions were grounded in sound information and accepted knowledge, circumstances often demand decision-making in situations of ignorance. Drawing on extracts of interviews with engineers facing unexpected situations while cleaning up contaminated sites or drilling in search of geothermal energy, Groß made it clear that some aspects of 'tacit knowledge' fall into the field of non-knowledge, and pointed to methodological problems in recognizing non-knowledge. He proposed to examine the precise wording and to register, besides statements of missing knowledge, also utterances of gut feelings, surprise, novelty, and metaphorical phrases.

The two following talks presented case studies in the history of cartography, one of the few historical sub-disciplines concerned with missing knowledge and 'silences of uniformity' (J. B. Harley). Zoltán Biedermann (London) took a closer look at a sample of maps displaying a region in present-day Iran, demonstrating how different cartographical regimes produced specific blind-spots. Lázaro Luís, for example, depicted the region in 1563 according to the portolan logic. Only sites that could be seen from water were included, while the inland was left blank. The information, delineated in a scheme of rhumb lines, derived from observation and the calculation of distances, while other possible sources such as hearsay or travel writing were left out because of their supposed unreliability. In contrast to Luís's approach, the maps which Gastaldi and Lafreri produced in 1561 used the Ptolemaic grid, in which locations were placed on the basis of coordinates. The sources they relied on ranged from Ptolemy to travelogues. This resulted in more places being depicted, but also in the integration of data far removed from the standards of reliability used for portolans. Nevertheless, in the medium term the grid outshone the portolan tradition as it was more appealing to a wider public. In some sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish maps, however, a clash of these different cartographic regimes can be detected.

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How Africa became the continent of 'non-knowledge' was demonstrated by Benjamin Steiner (Erfurt). Relying on a micro-study of the depiction of the Niger and Senegal rivers, he problematized networks of trust and different notions of reliability. In 1714 the rivers were for the first time correctly reproduced as two separate streams on a printed map by Guillaume Delisle. He had obviously had access to French Senegal Company manuscripts that reported the inhabitants' hearsay of the region's geography. The data was thus derived from an information regime connected to and thus dignified by the crown. Delisle endowed the reports with enough authority to supersede an almost 2,000-year-old tradition. Jean-Baptiste Anville's approach in 1749 was a very different one: leaving blank all spaces for which he had no 'reliable data', the cartographer adhered to a different knowledge concept by which only the reports of reliable, that is, socially classifiable, individuals were to be trusted. Indigenous knowledge was abandoned as non-knowledge, giving way to the idea of the epistemic superiority of European methodology. In Anville's map, the Niger and the Senegal were once again connected.

Decision-making and assessment in environments of non-knowledge formed the focus of the next papers. William O'Reilly (Cambridge) advocated the integration of a non-knowledge concept into migration studies. The decision to migrate, and where, was made not solely on the basis of 'rational' reasoning. Basing his observations on eighteenth-century German emigration, O'Reilly demonstrated that confession, state policy, and networks alone do not entirely explain migrants' decisions; rather their non-knowledge complemented and enhanced blurred information. Migrants' attitudes can be categorized along the dimensions of their awareness of non-knowledge, its intentionality, and its temporal stability. Referring to theories of risk-communication and Karin Knorr-Cetina's scientific epistemology, O'Reilly developed four questions for investigating the characteristic traits of the non-knowledge culture of emigrants. What temporal and spatial scale did they consider adequate for knowledge to be regarded as valid, reliable, and complete? How were unforeseen events addressed? How were complexity, uncertainty, ambiguity, and the limits of knowledge dealt with? What were the ways and routines of coping with the de- and re-contextualization of knowledge?

Anne Murphy (Hatfield) traced non-knowledge in surroundings usually considered well informed. Her analysis of the role of non-

knowledge in the creation of early modern financial markets challenged the assumption that prices reflected all manifest information. She stressed that the influence of talk about the unknown was more important in London's paper market in the 1690s than numbers and 'facts'. In a situation in which the state sought to borrow money by using various newly invented financial instruments, potential investors had to deal with a considerable degree of non-knowledge: neither were the returns of those instruments known, nor did parliament have a reputation as a borrower. Factors that made the loan successful were the prospect of high returns and the conversations of the investors. As oral networks mattered, bodily presence and geographical closeness were of high importance, even more so in situations when things went wrong, as they did. Only a few experienced investors got their investments back: those who were well connected and had learned, through their conversations, how to deal with the government.

Emma Spary (Cambridge) added yet a further dimension. Focusing on attempts by eighteenth-century French travellers to communicate the flavour of the pineapple, and methodologically located at the crossroads of the history of knowledge, food history, and sensory history, Spary pointed to the intransmissibility of certain forms of embodied experience. Like other exotic goods, the pineapple was introduced to Europeans by means of texts, images, and preserved specimens. Over time it adopted different meanings as it became a symbol for royalty or the Antilles. Yet, despite all attempts to stabilize embodied knowledge over distance, the pineapple's flavour eluded all efforts to grasp it, as it could not be preserved, nor could its taste in any way be adequately described by media. It remained unknowable to contemporaries, for whom it even became a marker for the intransmissibility of experiences. In a kind of 'reverse imperialism' the pineapple undermined French certainties about their superiority of taste as a culture.

While Emma Spary demonstrated that certain forms of knowledge cannot be communicated, Romain Bertrand (Paris) addressed the gaps within the chain of knowledge transmission. Looking at early seventeenth-century Portuguese, Dutch, and English expansion, he argued against the idea that knowledge could be accumulated simply by collecting manuscripts. He proved that proficiency in the Malay language was common among the Portuguese of Malacca; neverthe-

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less, there are no traces of a transmission of manuscripts to the motherland. Unlike the Portuguese, the Dutch and English started gathering Javanese and Malay manuscripts early. One of the collectors on site was Peter Willemsz Floris, who first worked for the Dutch before switching to the English East India Company. His command of Malay and Persian seems to have been better than that of Thomas Erpenius, a Leyden professor of Oriental languages who acquired Floris's manuscripts, but did not engage with them any further. After Erpenius's death, the manuscripts were sold to the library of Cambridge university, where they lay buried in oblivion until the nineteenth century. As knowledge was not extracted from the manuscripts by reading them, knowledge transmission came to a dead end too.

Martine Julia van Ittersum (Dundee) assessed the suppression of evidence and the misreading of documents by Hugo Grotius, thus answering Robert Proctor's plea for a history of 'agnotology'. As a solicitor and political adviser, Grotius developed justifications for the Dutch expansion. He drafted petitions for the East India Company, and wrote *Mare liberum* to defend the right of the Dutch to trade and navigate in the Indies. Van Ittersum exemplified Grotius's use of documents and the readjustment of his free-sea argument to situational requirements with two case studies. First, she instanced the piracy lawsuit against the owners of the *Swimming Lion*, for whom Grotius provided legal cover before the Middelburg Admiralty Court in 1609–10. Her second example featured the Anglo-Dutch colonial conferences of 1613 and 1615, when Grotius argued that the freedom of the sea is limited by contracts. In both cases he established and interpreted the 'facts' according to the present needs of his principals. In doing so, he wilfully created non-knowledge by suppressing contrary reports and presenting quite speculative narratives.

Since the workshop was intended to provide a forum for the exchange of ideas on a new topic, more than half of the time was devoted to discussions. These drew on the papers but also widened the field, exploring different perspectives, adding further examples and new aspects. As it is impossible to give a full account of the enormous richness of the discussions, some impressions must suffice. Almost all the themes of the cultural history of knowledge were reviewed in relation to non-knowledge, adding new aspects to questions of authority, expertise, reliability, experience, and access, to

name but a few. The interrelation between knowledge and non-knowledge was repeatedly described as dialectical. Links to concepts such as state-formation, governmentality, universalization, controllability, and modernization were also debated. Warnings were issued against interpretations that were too linear. However, two possible caesurae for a 'history of non-knowledge' emerged more than once. They can roughly be equated with 'Renaissance humanism' and 'enlightenment'. In both instances, the threshold between knowledge and non-knowledge was redefined, a new attitude towards the future emerged, and non-knowledge was reflected upon to a greater extent. Temporality and reflexivity figured prominently in the discussion of the conceptualization of a historical approach. Some participants suggested different labels and more subcategories, yet all agreed that forms of 'non-knowledge' reflected in contemporary life have to be separated from others visible only in retrospect. Methodologically, emphasis was placed on practices. Some argued for a mainly source-driven approach, while others insisted on the importance of having a theoretical framework first. Yet the possibility of a special 'theory of non-knowledge' met with scepticism for practical as well as philosophical reasons.

No workshop on a relatively new topic could cover all relevant aspects, and hence there were some gaps. First, there were no contributions on the historical semantics of 'non-knowledge' and 'ignorance'. Equally deplorable was the relatively minor coverage of Spanish-language material. Although several of the questions raised remained open or met with stimulatingly different answers, the integration of ignorance and non-knowledge into studies of expansion was generally supported. The exploration of the various answers to the challenges posed by 'ignorance' and 'non-knowledge' promises to yield a better grasp of the knowledge cultures of expanding powers. This workshop provided initial insights into a new field worthy of more attention from historians.

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