

A Social History of Knowledge. Volume II: From the Encyclopédie to Wikipedia

Review Number:

1271

Publish date:

Thursday, 14 June, 2012

Author:

Peter Burke

ISBN:

9780745650425

Date of Publication:

2012

Price:

£55.00

Pages:

248pp.

Publisher:

Polity Press

Publisher url:

Place of Publication:

Cambridge

Reviewer:

Martin Davies

‘I wish I knew a history was a history,’ remarks Gertrude Stein in *A Geographical History of America*. That might be because ‘history is the state of confusion between anybody doing anything and anything happening’.⁽¹⁾ An oblique way of starting a review of a social history of knowledge, perhaps – but indispensable for knowing how history knows knowledge and what the knowledge history knows reveals about historical knowledge. If anything could, this book, *A Social History of Knowledge*, covering 1750–2000, (that is, to just 12 years ago), a sequel to the author’s *A Social History of Knowledge. From Gutenberg to Diderot* (2000), should produce an answer.

The indeterminacy – identified by Stein – is constitutional. On the one hand, this book focusses on ‘knowledge bearing groups’ and ‘knowledge generating institutions’, on ‘intellectual environments rather than intellectual problems’ (pp. 3-4). So it sees itself variously as a ‘social history’, as a ‘historical sociology of knowledge’ because ‘knowledge is situated’, but not as a ‘political history of knowledge’ since its focus is ‘social acting’ more generally. Though it could have been ‘a historical ecology of knowledge’, since it goes into the social resources underpinning research; or even ‘a cultural history of knowledge’ since, concentrating on knowledge-gathering procedures, it reinforces ‘the idea of knowledges in the plural’ (p. 4). On the other, the book is ‘concerned mainly with academic knowledge’ and might have been called ‘a social history of academic knowledge’, did it not trace the ramifications of this knowledge for, and responses to it by, other regions and states (in relation to exploration, colonialism, commerce, etc.) (pp. 4–5).

The subject-matter is nebulous. The book's subject is inevitably 'a vast one'; it is also diffuse: it reckons not only with 'knowledges and knowledge traditions' and their interaction but also with dominant and subjugated knowledges and their political and economic instrumentalization (pp. 4–5). Any subject-matter is too vast for historical comprehension, always containing more information than can be represented, but here form and content are far from being clearly distinguished. By 'knowledge' as content it means 'raw information', by definition heterogeneous, treated by processes such as 'verification, criticism, measurement, comparison and systematization' (p. 4). But this definition forgets that 'information' itself already implies a pre-selection of experiential components according to pre-existing cognitive paradigms (e.g. disciplines, thought-styles, 'knowledge traditions') since it results from what Whitehead calls the 'vicious bifurcation of nature' into 'two divisions, namely into the nature apprehended in awareness and the nature which is the cause of awareness'.⁽²⁾ Conversely knowledge as a comprehensive category (or as 'knowledges', as sets of comprehensive categories) is nothing in itself, hence redundant, unless reflecting whatever controlled types of human behaviour, experience, and reflection define themselves as 'knowledge'.

The perspective is ambiguous. Inevitably historical practice evinces here something 'personal', the author having lived through 'changes in knowledge regimes over the last half century', hence there is something 'impressionistic in its methods and provisional in its conclusions' (pp. 6-7). Yet it would offer a 'bird's-eye view', since 'the point is to present a big picture of a kind that is often invisible to specialists, a picture that includes a general description of specialization itself' (p. 3). What links these antinomies (the personal and the pan-optic, visible specialization and the hitherto invisible big picture, the particular and the general)? For the social historian (who knows for certain that 'a history is a history') they would exemplify authentic knowledge tied to its particular standpoint in the 'stream of history'.⁽³⁾ For anyone else they work as a characteristic trope of historical discourse, catachresis, the unification of opposites, a rhetorical device both promising comprehensivity and excusing its impossibility. Still, holding all this together, making it make sense, is the 'book's essential concern with change over time' (pp.7, 45, 51, 202) – the principle *sine qua non* of historical enquiry. But, fallaciously predicated on the pre-eminence of this comprehensive temporal scheme, comprehensive enough to accommodate all other comprehensive knowledge categories, this refrain in historical discourse is a tautology exposed by its negative, 'change without time', as absurd.⁽⁴⁾ Instead, temporality must be inferred from change: historians may well invoke it and instrumentalize it, time has no intrinsic causal or explanatory property.

Ultimately, then, the social history of knowledge reveals itself as a technology for information management. The knowledge that results from 'raw information' processed by disciplinary procedures is in its turn converted or sublated [*aufgehoben*] by socio-historicizing procedures into historical information, a 'higher' form of information, information about knowledge. Hence, the contribution this *Social History* makes to knowledge is administrative and managerial – a synthesis of the available information about knowledge as a social practice. It employs two opposite but complementary structural schemes: static sociological categorizations and dynamic historical trends.

The static sociological categorizations identify types of social-cognitive behaviour. So part one, concerning 'Knowledge practices', describes the 'gathering', 'analyzing', 'disseminating' and 'employing' of 'knowledges' (pp. 11–135); part two, on 'The price of progress', examines under 'Losing knowledges' forms of knowledge that have become obsolete or been superseded (e.g., astrology, phrenology, eugenics) and under 'Dividing knowledges' the hyperproduction of knowledge due – *inter alia* – to specialization, ever narrowing fields of expertise, and interdisciplinarity (pp. 137–83); part three, offering a 'Social history in three dimensions', defines 'Geographies of knowledge', 'Sociologies of knowledge', and – finally – 'Chronologies of knowledge' (pp. 185–275). Thus the nominal structure created by these categorizations integrates various types of socially defined, cognitive behaviour into a comprehensive totality. Social history is thus an information-management system based on static nominal classifications operating as historical constants. It describes practices (e.g. 'surveys', 'expeditions', 'specimen-gathering/accumulation', 'fieldwork', 'observation'; 'classifying', 'deciphering', 'dating'; 'speaking', 'displaying', publishing; 'retrieval', 'knowledge in business and industry', 'knowledge in war, government, and universities'); it records social trends that abandon or promote forms of knowledge (e.g. hiding, destroying or discarding

knowledges and ideas; the rise of the scientist, scientific associations, the culture of expertise, interdisciplinarity, and teamwork etc.); it maps the locations of organizations of knowledge practices, surveys 'the relationship between knowledge and its social environment' (p. 218), and registers the 'contrasts between longer and shorter trends and the diverse trajectories of particular regions and disciplines' (p. 245). At the same time, these information-management categories calibrate the dynamics of knowledge production since their performance at any moment in reality evinces mutation. 'Writing', to cite a typical example, (as a practice of dissemination) is modified 'as a result of changes in technology' with breathtaking results: 'At the beginning of our period, letters and books were written with quills, but metal pens became the norm in the nineteenth century, followed by fountain pens at the end of the century, ball-point pens in the 1940s and roller-balls in the 1980s [...]' (pp. 94–5). Though the comprehensive structure that manages knowledge in socio-historical terms is static, each practice in each category is inherently dynamic. Change too is, apparently, another constant – a constant trend. The coordination of these historical trends operating through socio-cognitive constants integral to a comprehensive structural framework makes up the social history of knowledge.

The dynamic historical trends articulate a period of drastic, exponential change, the 'rapid expansion and fragmentation' of knowledge described variously as 'staggering' and 'mind-boggling' (pp.12, 31, 248). Yet their overall effect is of animation suspended, partly because they are produced by constant social categories, but mainly because they are described in terms of their antecedents, of knowledge 'already known' [*déjà connu*], a typical reflex of academic practice.⁽⁵⁾ So the detection of forgeries 'has a long history going back at least to classical antiquity itself' (p. 60); given there were 'showmen of science' in Victorian England the present use of Powerpoint to create a spectacle 'is not so much an innovation as a revival' (p. 91); the debate over the relevance of academic knowledge in the 1970s, going back even to the Middle Ages, 'is little more than a new version of an old controversy' (p. 130). Underlying the complementary static sociological and dynamic historical structures in this *Social History* is the conventional historical emplotment of 'change and continuity'. However 'mind-boggling' the transformation, it is historically all the same: the latest thing a revamp of the same old thing. In fact the identitary logic essential for producing the comprehensive, pan-optic 'big picture' requires sameness: this mimetic principle is the criterion of its truth. This sameness crucially defines this *Social History*.

Essentially it describes itself. Since the knowledge practices, disciplines, and institutions are in themselves already historically organized and already use socio-historical methods, this *Social History* actually portrays itself as a history of histories, as a history of historical processes. Accordingly it plays down the internal, logical mutation of academic disciplines according to successive thought-styles, paradigm shifts, or discourse-types, in order to stress historical trends, principally by means of the numerous chronologies that inflect its narrative: thus, for example, the growth of astronomical telescopes, 1789–2009 (p. 39); the increasing expenditure and expansion of the FBI, 1908–2003 (p. 123); the establishment of learned societies, 1815–56 (p. 165); the founding of museums, 1822–89 (pp. 93, 259) – not to mention the history of the expansion of historical time itself in the chronological development successively of palaeontology, geology, and astronomy (p. 22). It assumes that history, as a self-styled 'cosmic clock', keeps regular time, parcelling itself out into cognitively convenient 'short and long-term trends' (pp. 252ff.).⁽⁶⁾ It never doubts that the 'explosion' of knowledges orientated by historical processes might have de-stabilized the notion of regular historical time itself, accelerating it (as Koselleck argued), at any rate relegating it to a thing of the past.⁽⁷⁾

Its standpoint is indifference – orientated as this *Social History* is by sameness. Hence, it is all the same: 'the commercial funding of scientific research [...] is an acceleration of older processes' (p. 115); military 'commanders have made use of intelligence about [...] enemy forces for thousands of years' (p. 117); 'spying is an old activity, but it was in our period that it was professionalized (p. 121). It is all the same: it veers indiscriminately between examples of instrumental reason and administrative research often undertaken for ulterior motives, on the one hand, and self-motivating academic inquisitiveness, on the other, as though they really are the same. It thus recognizes and legitimizes any employment of knowledge, indifferent to its implications for human species-essential interests.

Its function is redundant. As Adorno points out, 'the value of a thought can be measured by the distance

which keeps it from being continuous with what is known already'.⁽⁸⁾ As the exemplary form of academic knowledge, predicated on tracing antecedents, recognizing only predetermined standards, history represents only what is already known – as this *Social History of Knowledge* confirms. And so the comprehensive standpoint, sustained already by identitary thinking, collapses now that 'historians too have become more and more aware of their own place in history' and this *Social History* merges into a 'trend', a 'growing interest in the histories of knowledge', which it itself has helped to define and reinforce, and which a subsequent generation will 'take further' (pp. 274–5). This is meant to be read as a vindication of historicism, as authentic testimony from a standpoint in the 'stream of history' (as Mannheim argued).⁽⁹⁾ But, since the historicist premise has to be accepted *a priori* for this conclusion to be vindicated and since too it really is unclear how 'a history is a history', it culminates in solipsism.

Thus basing the argument on the principle of identity, adopting *a priori* an affirmative stance (that is, a social historian endorsing continuing trends in the social history of knowledge) automatically precludes any differing evaluation. Academic impartiality would apparently be conducive to value-free science if, in writing the social history of its practice, it did not from the start approve of itself, if it did not read its 'staggering' development and its 'explosive' effects as self-affirmation (pp. 12, 248ff). Surely though the argument cannot be so self-absorbed as to ignore those aspects of its socio-historical scheme where a critical evaluation is indispensable and which a comprehensive overview ought uniquely to discern?

There is the presumption that knowledge is 'mainly academic knowledge' (p. 5), that, therefore, 'academic knowledge' is an exhaustive category. In fact, it can be subsumed under 'intellectual work' given the fundamental, societal distinction between intellectual and manual work.⁽¹⁰⁾ But then intellectual work subdivides into the work of the 'public intellectual' (e.g., the 'free-floating intellectual' (Mannheim) or the 'technician of the universal' (Sartre)) and the work of the expert (e.g., the 'technician of practical knowledge' (Sartre) or the 'resources manager' [*Besteller des Bestandes*] (Heidegger), or the 'information engineer' (Toulmin)).⁽¹¹⁾ So to take academic knowledge, be it exercised by the professional or by many varieties of amateur 'knowledge worker', for knowledge itself, the total product of intellectual work, already constitutes a coercive pre-conception (pp. 232–5). The knowledge being described socio-historically is actually technical knowledge, information-management technology – knowledge in its already recognized, established, dominant form (cf. p. 173).

The pan-optic overview has a blind-spot. Philosophy is more or less excluded. It cannot, it seems, be a form of knowledge. Evidently without social or historical value it simply does not figure as development. Those few philosophers who are mentioned have merely a 'walk-on' role: (e.g.) Lyotard for his 'postmodernity' (p. 80); Nietzsche for his alleged 'perspectivism' (p. 260); Heidegger for his Nazi affiliations (p. 227). But, reflecting on the exponential growth of academic-technical knowledge the social historian finds both overwhelming and enthralling, these philosophers have radical and legitimate misgivings about its overall cultural effects. Predictably, therefore, social history reduces Husserl's reasoned apprehensions, expressed in the classic, exemplary *Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1936) to the glib opinion of a private individual: 'The philosopher Edmund Husserl, for instance, believed that knowledges or disciplines had undergone a crisis around the year 1900' (p. 253).

Social history evidently goes with whatever goes socially. If the practices, groups, environments are what are going, then these must be 'normal': history's 'big picture' portrays their likeness. But how to describe the process being described? How can anyone tell it is normal if it is just the way it is? Social history dodges this challenge. So Weber's concept of 'disenchantment of the world' here explains merely the demise of astrology (p. 152), whereas (for Weber) it is symptomatic of a temporally vast 'intellectualization process' [*Intellektualisierungsprozess*] that includes the development of modern knowledge this *Social History* would describe.⁽¹²⁾ Conversely, given that knowledge contained in the 'vast number of books published in this period' (for example, in 1990 842,000 world-wide (p. 100)) does not activate unless someone reads them, much of it condemns itself to redundancy. Doesn't this standpoint rather confirm 'the rising-tide of insignificance' [*la montée de l'insignifiance*] symptomatic of a socio-historical trend towards ephemeralization, endorsed by an academic 'pseudo-consensus', that a critical social philosophy should denounce?⁽¹³⁾ And isn't the current 'knowledge explosion' (pp. 248–50) more than just 'a new metaphor'

but rather, as Virilio suggests, the effect of a real ‘information bomb’, an opening manoeuvre in a real ‘information war’ that really will re-programme human existence?(14) Oblivious to other perspectives, the perspective from social history, both impoverished and constrictive, is deceptive, perpetrates a ‘systematic falsification’.(15)

Ultimately, what does this accumulated knowledge actually do? What have this academic effort and the capital resources that sustain it to show for themselves? Here too socio-historical comprehension seems myopic. It has – for good or ill – transformed the background of human existence. But it has patently failed to remove engrained social and existential inequalities either locally or globally. In fact, ‘knowledges’ have developed exponentially at a time when these inequalities have become increasingly flagrant. So given that knowledge still is advanced through business, war, imperialism, and political authority (pp. 114ff.), through the way things are, academic effort is part of the world-problem: it exacerbates it rather than resolves it. Only academic élitism would maintain that familiarity with specialized erudition is a pre-condition for a socially rewarding life.(16) Rather the technical knowledge society accumulates as a historical legacy preemptively occludes whatever talents it might require to create its immediate present and future. Living in a historically ‘prepared’ situation, observed Gertrude Stein, means ‘living several generations behind’ bereft of contemporaries, which is ‘very much too bad’.(17) And this temporal dislocation constitutive of the actual social situation of socio-historical knowledge appears in the reiterated confirmation that, particularly with respect to ‘Employing knowledges’, it finds – as mentioned earlier – ‘nothing new’ or, at best, ‘a new version of an old controversy’, something ‘considerably older than people generally think’ (cf. pp. 115, 130, 134, 135, 176, 178). So, in the light of the questions this *Social History* could have asked of its subject, it is perverse for it to maintain that it ‘is not concerned with recommending a particular attitude to knowledge’ (p. 7). Actually, as an academic book about the social history of its own self-knowledge (p. 275), it offers the perfect example of academic self-regard.

Notes

1. Gertrude Stein, *A Geographical History of America or the Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind* (New York, 1973), pp.72, 141.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Alfred North Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature* (Cambridge, 1920), pp.20–1, 30–1, 187.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. cf. Karl Mannheim, *Essays on the sociology of Knowledge* (Abingdon, 2000), pp.119–20, 147ff.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. cf. Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature*, p. 178.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Pierre Bourdieu, *Méditations pascaliennes* (Paris, 1997), p. 76.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Mannheim, *Essays*, p. 84.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt am Main, 1985), pp. 47ff., 77ff., 321.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia. Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (Frankfurt am Main, 1978), p. 99 (§50).[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Mannheim, *Essays*, pp.119-20, 147ff.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. cf. Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit* (Weinheim, 1989).[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. Karl Mannheim, *Ideologie und Utopie* (Frankfurt am Main, 1995), pp.135ff.; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Plaidoyer pour les intellectuels* (Paris, 1972), pp.25, 49; Martin Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze. Teil I* (Tübingen, 1967), pp.22, 26; Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis. The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago, 1990), p.104.[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (Tübingen, 1988), p. 593.[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. Cornelius Castoriadis, *La montée de l’insignifiance* (Paris, 1996), pp. 84, 86–7.[Back to \(13\)](#)
14. Paul Virilio, *La bombe informatique* (Paris, 1998), pp. 154ff.[Back to \(14\)](#)
15. Bourdieu, *Méditations pascaliennes*, pp. 63ff.[Back to \(15\)](#)
16. Bourdieu, *Méditations pascaliennes*, p. 83.[Back to \(16\)](#)
17. Gertrude Stein, *What are Masterpieces?* (New York, 1970), pp. 26, 28.[Back to \(17\)](#)

Other reviews:

Heterodoxology

<http://heterodoxology.com/2011/04/13/peter-burke-the-social-history-of-knowledge-and-agnology-notes-on-a-lecture/>

[2]

Theory, Culture and Society

<http://theoryculturesociety.blogspot.co.uk/2010/12/peter-burke-on-social-history-of.html> [3]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1271>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/20914>

[2] <http://heterodoxology.com/2011/04/13/peter-burke-the-social-history-of-knowledge-and-agnotology-notes-on-a-lecture/>

[3] <http://theoryculturesociety.blogspot.co.uk/2010/12/peter-burke-on-social-history-of.html>