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From content to circulation

Influential books and the history of knowledge

David Larsson Heidenblad

Influential books are rarely neglected in historical research. Rather, they tend to occupy a privileged position among the historian's source material. My own field of research, the history of modern environmentalism, is no exception. For decades scholars have analysed landmark accounts such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968). However, despite these books' reputation as global bestsellers, it is their content and their authors which have attracted most attention from scholars.¹ Hence, we know much more about the intellectual underpinnings of the books than about how they circulated in the 1960s and beyond.² Neither is this unique to this particular field of research.

In this essay I propose that historians of knowledge could make original contributions to historical inquiry by substantiating a shift of analytical focus from content to circulation.³ This implies that the wider importance of certain well-known publications should be empirically examined and demonstrated, rather than assumed.⁴ Such research would not necessarily require the historian to analyse a book's contents in depth; rather it is its public circulation that demands a fine-grained interpretation. Where, when, how, and by whom were influential books mentioned and discussed in public? Which parts circulated as knowledge, and how was this knowledge moulded by various carriers and media? Questions of this kind are not new, yet they are in practice often overshadowed by the careful analysis of content, origin, and production. This begs the question of what would happen if public circulation were to be prioritized by historians of knowledge.

In the following I will reflect on this by drawing on my research on the Swedish debate about the future, which raged in 1971–1972.⁵ This moment of public preoccupation with the long term was sparked by the Swedish biochemist Gösta Ehrensvärd's short book *Före–Efter: En diagnos* (1971), in which he argued that the technologically advanced societies of the early 1970s would soon become historical parentheses. According to his calculations, which centred on rapid population growth and dwindling natural resources, a global breakdown would likely occur in around 2050. He predicted that global collapse would be followed by centuries of mass starvation and political turmoil, after which a considerably reduced human population would be able to build up a new and stable agrarian civilization.⁶ The book became an unexpected commercial success in Sweden, going through seven editions in its first year. It topped the bestseller chart and propelled its author to the centre of public attention. My concern here is to study how Ehrensvärd's forecast circulated as knowledge in Swedish society in the early 1970s.

Operationalizing circulation

The methodology I have employed to study the circulation of Ehrensvärd's predictions is inspired by the Swiss historians Philipp Sarasin and Andreas Kilcher. They define knowledge as an intrinsically communicative phenomenon and stress that it always requires a medium or carrier. Moreover, they distance themselves from concepts such as 'diffusion', 'conveyance', and 'exchange', since these imply that knowledge can easily be shared and transferred. Instead they argue that when carriers and mediums transport knowledge they inevitably mould the knowledge in question.⁷ Knowledge is always formatted by its medium.⁸ Thus it is important for historians to chart how knowledge has circulated, while remaining alert to its potential transformations.

The empirical focus of my study is the Swedish public sphere in the early 1970s. I have explored the major media platforms of the time—national newspapers (broadsheets and tabloids), magazines, television, and radio—in order to find out where and when Ehrensvärd's predictions were visible in the media landscape. My search began with a thorough examination of the leading newspapers of

the era, from October 1971 to June 1972. This extensive material was not only a valuable direct source, but gave an indirect sense of Ehrensvärd's relative importance in the public debate. In my experience this method is preferable to consulting collections of a more selective kind, such as clippings archives, since they do not have the larger media context in which the texts originally occurred—a lack that makes scholars prone to exaggerate, or misunderstand, the extent of any circulation.⁹ However, it is also a time-consuming method and not without its problems. For that reason, I followed my initial survey with searches of the newspaper index *Svenska tidningsartiklar* and the database *Svensk mediedatabas* (audiovisual material). Upon excerpting the data, I came across references to other sources which I duly consulted. I concluded with exploratory readings of a number of popular magazines and specialist publications.

The final body of source material consists of reviews, op-eds, interviews, television programmes, political cartoons, essays, and photographs. Having ordered it chronologically, from the book's release in October 1971 to the early days of June 1972, (when the first UN Conference on the Human Environment was held in Stockholm) I was able to closely examine the circulation of Ehrensvärd's knowledge in the Swedish media.¹⁰

In answering the guiding questions of when, where, and how Ehrensvärd's forecast circulated as knowledge, and how different media outlets and journalistic genres moulded that knowledge, I paid particular attention to the recurrent themes and cross-references—to the points that moved between various media platforms and demonstrably circulated over a prolonged period of time. At an early stage I also found that the circulation of rival knowledge claims was crucial to how Ehrensvärd's knowledge circulated in the public sphere. I thus sought to unravel the larger discussions in which it featured, while not straying too far away from my empirical theme.

Another key methodological choice was how to deal with rare or unique occurrences, for example certain forms of critique of the ideological basis of Ehrensvärd's predictions. While I found these dissenting voices interesting, my guiding principle was to treat them as contemporaries had done. That is, if something was said publicly once or twice but not more, and met with a continuous silence, my

conclusion was that whatever the historical actor had to say had failed to circulate. Thus I did not follow through on my own curiosity for the particular and instead kept to general or recurring tendencies.

The strict day-by-day chronological sorting differed from my previous work on similar kinds of source material. A cultural historian by training, I have a preference for organizing material thematically, a mode of analysis that lends itself to pinpointing discursive patterns and underlying cultural logics.¹¹ However, when analysing circulation as a process that continuously moulds knowledge anew, I deemed greater chronological precision a necessity. I also soon established that even though Ehrensvärd's book was not revised between its various printings, the way it circulated in the Swedish media landscape most certainly did change.

To demonstrate this, I divided the period under investigation into four phases of public circulation: the entrance, the breakthrough, the challenge, and the cultural point of reference. While this is a sort of thematic order, it was derived from chronological sequencing and not from discursive affinities. In the following I will present what distinguished these phases from one another and discuss the general merits of the approach.

From urgent knowledge to pessimistic prophecy

In mid-November 1971, when the Swedish media first took notice of Ehrensvärd's predictions, the entrance phase began. Lasting out the year, it was marked by a reverence for Ehrensvärd's scientific credibility, hard facts, and meticulous calculations. However, at this point the media circulation consisted exclusively of book reviews. In this journalistic genre, the predictions were accepted as solid knowledge, but Ehrensvärd was by no means at the centre of public attention.

This changed in 1972, when several leading newspapers began the new year by publishing op-eds on this alarming knowledge. It was noted that Ehrensvärd's book had become a bestseller—topping the chart of Christmas book sales—and public interest intensified markedly. Of special importance in this phase, the breakthrough, was that Ehrensvärd started to give interviews. On 9 January 1972 he appeared on the front page of the Sunday issue of *Dagens Nyheter*, Sweden's most

prestigious newspaper at the time. In the accompanying interview he discussed the urgency of the situation and called for decisive political action.¹² The impact of this on the public circulation of his knowledge was plainly visible a week later, when the same newspaper interviewed the Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme and the leader of the Liberal Party Gunnar Helén about their response to Ehrensvärd's forecast.¹³ By now it was evident that the book had sparked substantial public concern and was regarded as urgent knowledge.

However, the way in which something circulates as public knowledge can change rapidly. During the third phase—the challenge—Ehrensvärd's claims were called into question and became the focal point for a polarized debate. The main reason for this was the publication of another book about the future, *Futurum Exaktum* (1972), by the nuclear physicist Tor Ragnar Gerholm. His vision of the future was rosy, even though he agreed with Ehrensvärd that dire problems loomed large on the horizon. Gerholm argued that human ingenuity, economic growth, and technological progress would provide solutions, come what may.¹⁴

Gerholm did not shun public attention or controversy. His account sparked several intersecting debates, which Ehrensvärd's predictions became entangled with. Moreover, the two professors' different outlooks were dramatized by tabloids and popular magazines. Gerholm was labelled an optimist, Ehrensvärd a pessimist and prophet of doom, and while he repeatedly sought to portray himself as a realist and long-term optimist it was the negative label that stuck.

In March 1972, though, it was Ehrensvärd who was invited by the ruling Social Democratic Party to speak to their national conference on the subject of the future: 'Is the future possible?' His address there was followed by an appearance on national television alongside high-profile politicians and environmentalists such as Tage Erlander and Hans Palmstierna. In this forum Ehrensvärd was once again acknowledged to be a respected, knowledgeable expert. And he not only spoke urgent words of warning, but also pointed to possible political and technological solutions.¹⁵

This was a stark contrast to the polarized press debate, and marked the beginning of the fourth phase of circulation—the predictions as a cultural point of reference. By now the Swedish debate about the

future was increasingly directed by other accounts, such as the Club of Rome report *Limits to Growth* (1972) and Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (which were published in Swedish translation in the spring of 1972).¹⁶ Ehrensvärd withdrew from public view, while his antagonist Gerholm continued to take a polemic, activist stance. However, Ehrensvärd's predictions remained a significant point of reference in public debate since the book was widely regarded as kickstarting Sweden's debate about the future. While he never entirely shook off the negative labels—pessimist, doomsday prophet—Ehrensvärd was also referred to as a distinguished expert on the future.

Circulation and conflict

The contents of Ehrensvärd's book *Före–Efter: En diagnos* did not change between the autumn of 1971 and the summer of 1972. Every reprint consisted of the same arguments, diagrams, metrics, and tables. However, as we have seen, his predictions did not circulate in the same manner throughout the period. What was considered to be urgent knowledge in November 1971 had been reduced to a pessimistic alternative in a polarized debate in February 1972. This outcome could not have been reached by an ever so close reading of Ehrensvärd's book; rather, the empirical result is directly dependent on a shift of analytical focus—from content to public circulation.

In Sarasin and Kilcher's discussion of circulation, they argue that the carriers and the media that transport knowledge invariably mould it.¹⁷ This trait is discernible in the source material which I have studied, but of even greater importance is how the various knowledge claims interacted with one another. The most dramatic change in how Ehrensvärd's knowledge circulated was a direct consequence of Tor Ragnar Gerholm joining the public fray: Gerholm's rival knowledge claims radically altered the way Ehrensvärd's predictions and expertise circulated in the public sphere.

The important relationship between conflict and knowledge has attracted considerable attention in both the history and sociology of science.¹⁸ It has repeatedly been stressed that the making of knowledge is a collective phenomenon, and is marked by competition.¹⁹ In recent years there have also been studies of how public conflicts have been

deliberately staged about issues such as climate change and smoking in order to unsettle the public's trust in scientific findings.²⁰ While such conclusions cannot be drawn from my study, it is nevertheless evident that the public conflict between Ehrensverd and Gerholm had a profound effect on how knowledge of the future circulated in the Swedish media in the early 1970s.

Transferability and prerequisites

How useful, then, are my findings to the development of the history of knowledge? Could the methodology I have employed be applicable in other empirical cases or fields of historical inquiry? What about its geographical and chronological scope? Could the circulation of knowledge in, say, early modern European societies be studied with a similar method? How about the contemporary digital landscape? Questions such as these are critical to the development of new analytical concepts. First, though, to some other possible lessons to be learnt from focusing on public circulation.

Other than the study outlined above, I have employed the concept of circulation in an essay that dealt with the advent of public environmental concern in Sweden in the autumn of 1967.²¹ This study is centred on, but not limited to, the public discussion of Hans Palmstierna's book *Plundring, svält, förgiftning* (1967, 'Looting, starving, poisoning') and the edited volume *Människans villkor: En bok av vetenskapsmän för politiker* (1967, 'The human condition: A book by scientists for politicians').²² My analysis makes evident that while the content of these books, and the scientific credibility of the authors, was similar, they circulated in distinctly different ways. While Palmstierna's book was widely lauded as reasonable and constructive, *Människans villkor* sparked political controversy. In this particular case, as in the debate about the future in 1971–1972, the concept of circulation was decidedly helpful in unravelling and analysing the differences.

However, I have also conducted studies where circulation has failed as a guiding concept, notably about the Swedish diplomat Rolf Edberg's pioneering account *Spillran av ett moln* (1966, *On the Shred of a Cloud*).²³ This book has been described as something of a public breakthrough for an ecological worldview in Scandinavia.²⁴ Yet, in

comparison with the autumn of 1967 and the spring of 1972, public interest in Edberg's book in the autumn of 1966 was lukewarm at best. As a result, I could not muster a sufficiently large, dynamic body of source material for the kind of circulation analysis I have outlined here. Instead, I decided to analyse the contents of the book and study its reception in a comparative Scandinavian perspective.²⁵

Hence, as even my own small sample shows, there are limits to the applicability of the concept of the circulation of knowledge in historical research. It has served well in empirical cases where there was an intense, sustained public interest in a certain body of knowledge. In addition, I have found it particularly interesting to explore how related knowledge claims of various sorts circulated simultaneously and affected one another. It is also evident that knowledge and expertise tend to be thought indistinguishable in public circulation processes.²⁶

Yet the larger historiographical question remains. Is my take on circulation relevant to other historical periods and settings? Is the existence of a modern public sphere necessary to explore the circulation of knowledge in this way? What about periods where exact dates are difficult or impossible to pin down? And what about historical instances where the potential source material is enormous? Where, for example, to begin a public circulation analysis of knowledge and expertise about climate change in the mid-2010s?

My answer is that there are most certainly limits to this understanding of the circulation of knowledge, and that the methodology will have to be properly adjusted if applied to other historical settings. It is my conviction, though, that historians of knowledge are well positioned to develop new alternatives to established research practices. If we decide to focus on how things circulated as public knowledge in the past, we will have to ask ourselves whether the source material we have gathered was of any real concern to contemporaries.²⁷ How many read it or came into contact with it? If the answer is very few, our first response will have to be to search for other kinds of material to analyse. True, if applied rigorously, this would severely restrict our view of the past. Yet, in my experience, it can still help us to ask new questions and explore new avenues—a good place to start if we plan on developing the history of knowledge.

'So should we not read influential books?' This question—and it's

a good one—has been raised at several conferences and seminars. My answer is that we should, but perhaps not for reasons we are used to, and not as the first thing we do. Rather, I would argue that it is particularly rewarding to read an influential book *after* analysing the public circulation of the relevant knowledge. By doing this, the historian will be able both to recognize the content that did circulate and to identify the content that did not. I would say the latter is the more interesting, as it is something that I have not previously encountered in my analyses of circulation. On several occasions it has struck me just how little of a book's content it is that actually enters public circulation. To me, this observation is yet another argument for us to shift focus away from knowledge as it was crafted and produced to knowledge as it was read and discussed.

Notes

- 1 John McCormick, *The Global Environmental Movement: Reclaiming Paradise* (London: Belhaven, 1989); Linda Lear, *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature* (New York: Holt, 1997); Ramachandra Guha, *Environmentalism: A Global History* (New York: Longman, 2000); Matthew Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2008); Thomas Robertson, *The Malthusian Moment: Global Population Growth and the Birth of American Environmentalism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012).
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- 3 This study was supported by the Crafoord Foundation and is part of the project 'The History of Knowledge Cultures: A New Programme'.
- 4 James A. Secord, 'Knowledge in Transit', *Isis* 95/4 (2004): 659.
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- 6 Gösta Ehrensvärd, *Före–Efter: En diagnos* (Stockholm: Aldus, 1971).
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- 8 Johan Östling, 'Vad är kunskapshistoria?', *Historisk tidskrift* 135/1 (2015).
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- 10 Lars-Åke Engfeldt, *From Stockholm to Johannesburg and Beyond: The Evolution of the International System for Sustainable Development Governance and its Implications* (Stockholm: Government Offices of Sweden, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2009).
 - 11 David Larsson Heidenblad, *Vårt eget fel: Moralisk kausalitet som tankefigur från 1900-talets klimatlarm till förmoderna syndastraffsföreställningar* (Höör: Agerings 2012).
 - 12 Björn Berglund, 'Uran, kol, olja—allt sinar', *Dagens Nyheter*, 9 January 1972.
 - 13 Björn Berglund & Carina Fredén, 'Kan ni rädda oss?', *Dagens Nyheter*, 16 January 1972.
 - 14 Tor Ragnar Gerholm, *Futurum exaktum: Fortsatt teknisk utveckling? Spekulation om problem som måste lösas före år 2000* (Stockholm: Aldus, 1972).
 - 15 'Kvällsöppet', *SVT2*, 7 March 1972.
 - 16 Donella H. Meadows, Dennis L. Meadows, Jørgen Randers & William W. Behrens III, *Tillväxtens gränser: En rapport utarbetad för Romklubbens projekt 'Mänsklighetens situation'*, trans. Margareta Eklöf (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1972); Paul Ehrlich, *Befolknings-explosionen*, trans. Marianne Faxén (Stockholm: Jordens vänner, 1972).
 - 17 Sarasin & Kilcher, 'Editorial'.
 - 18 David Bloor, *Knowledge and Social Imagery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Harry Collins, *Changing Order: Replication and Induction in Scientific Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Harry Collins & Trevor Pinch, *The Golem: What You Should Know about Science* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998); Sergio Sismondo, *An Introduction to Science and Technology Studies* (Malden: Blackwell, 2004).
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 - 21 David Larsson Heidenblad, 'Mapping a New History of the Ecological Turn: The Circulation of Environmental Knowledge in Sweden 1967', *Environment and History* (in press).
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 - 24 Jonas Anshelm, *Socialdemokraterna och miljöfrågan: En studie av framstegstankens paradoxer* (Stockholm: Symposion, 1995); Eva Friman, *No Limits: The 20th Century Discourse on Economic Growth* (Umeå: Institutionen för historiska studier, 2002); Björn-Ola Linnér, *Att lära för överlevnad: Utbildningsprogrammen och miljöfrågorna 1962–2002* (Lund: Arkiv, 2005); Bredo Berntsen, *Grønne linjer: Natur- og miljøvernets historie i Norge* (Oslo: Unipub, 2011).

- 25 David Larsson Heidenblad, 'Ett ekologiskt genombrott: Rolf Edbergs bok och det globala krismedvetandet i Skandinavien 1966', *Historisk tidsskrift* 95/2 (2016); David Larsson Heidenblad & Isak Hammar, 'A Classical Tragedy in the Making: Rolf Edberg's Use of Antiquity and the Emergence of Environmentalism in Scandinavia', *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 24/2 (2017).
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- 27 Andreas Daum, 'Varieties of Popular Science and the Transformations of Public Knowledge', *Isis* 100/2 (2009).