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Revisiting agency in the history of knowledge

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This is the third and final book in our trilogy on the history of knowledge. The first volume, *Circulation of Knowledge* (2018), explored knowledge in motion and how it potentially changed as it moved between genres, geographies, and social contexts. In the new field of the history of knowledge, emerging as it did in the 2010s, the circulation of knowledge became a popular concept, but it was used with different meanings and risked becoming a vague buzzword. Our ambition with the book was to show how circulation could be a fruitful analytical framework, opening a broader understanding of the different processes of knowledge. In the second volume, *Forms of Knowledge* (2020), our aim was to expand the concept of knowledge itself. We showed how various forms of knowledge played a fundamental role in society and in people's lives throughout history. Systematic, scientific, and rational knowledge had been crucial in many settings, but so had many other forms of knowledge.¹

In our previous volumes on the history of knowledge, questions related to actors and agency have been of indirect analytical importance, more because of the perspective we adopted than otherwise. The concept of circulation, for example, could help uncover the full extent of knowledge processes and point us at types of actors not usually ascribed significance. In a similar way, the broadening of the concept of knowledge in our second volume brought new groups

and individuals into focus. Knowledge actors have so far been an important but unarticulated analytical category in our work on the history of knowledge.

In this third volume, we bring knowledge actors to the fore. Gathering researchers with diverse backgrounds and expertise, the guiding questions in this book centre on agency. Who were knowledge actors in different historical settings? What did it mean to be knowledgeable, to use or have knowledge, to produce or circulate it? Who contributed to knowledge processes and how—and what have the obstacles and constraints been?

Actors in the history of knowledge

Every country, every era has its share of biographies of eminent scientists, intellectuals, and educational reformers. Still, it is not misleading to claim in very general terms that the theoretical traditions that have left their mark on historical and sociological studies of knowledge have long emphasized structures over actors, collectives over individuals. In its first phase, in the interwar period, this was true of the pioneering studies by Ludwik Fleck, Karl Mannheim, and several Marxist scholars. In a second phase, in the post-war decades, various versions of structuralism were suggested by Claude Lévi-Strauss, Thomas Kuhn, Michel Foucault, Juri Lotman, and others. In the final decades of the twentieth century, influential new concepts and frameworks were introduced by theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu, Donna Haraway, and Bruno Latour.²

Since the history of knowledge draws on these traditions, it risks becoming faceless if individual people are not put centre stage. Suzanne Marchand is among those who have expressed this concern. She has criticized the legacy of what she calls ‘Foucauldian structuralism’ in the history of knowledge and science, with ‘its erasure of individual biographies and intentions’. Marchand asks, ‘is there room in the history of knowledge for an approach that privileges not the knowledge making as such but the wider context and the peculiarities of the knowers?’³

We want to believe that is the case. The history of knowledge, as we have pursued it at the Lund Centre for the History of Knowledge (LUCK), owes much to several scholarly sources. For us, the new cultural history and its further development have been at least as important as the leading names in the post-war history and sociology of science.⁴ The currents that swept through historical scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s, often summed up as cultural or linguistic turns, have taken different approaches to agency in the past. There has been a strong orientation towards linguistic patterns or cognitive structures in history—analysed in terms of concepts, discourses, mentalities, experiences, or memories. While actors have been present in these scholarly traditions, they have held secondary roles as ‘prisms’ or ‘examples’, shedding light on more general trends or phenomena.

However, recent decades have seen other movements within the broad church of cultural history. Stressing particularities and informed by idiographic approaches, they were a rebellion against the primacy of structures. This could be seen in a famous microhistorical study of a seemingly wayward Italian miller in the sixteenth century, or in many anthropologically or ethnologically grounded investigations into the lives of ordinary men and women. The return of actors, however, is a wider phenomenon than this. Since the early 2000s, there has been talk of a ‘biographical renaissance’ in the humanities: once regarded as dusty and old-fashioned, the biography has been ‘reborn’ to emerge as a dynamic scholarly genre, capable of combining sophisticated analytical approaches with the art of vivid storytelling.⁵ Even in traditionally structural fields, such as the study of organizations and institutions, actors have been brought to the centre of attention. Within the new framework of ‘institutional work’, scholars have shifted their focus from anonymous processes to examine how individuals’ active agency has affected institutions.⁶

In the new field of the history of knowledge, the role, functions, and manifestations of historical actors have often been discussed. In the first programmatic texts on the history of knowledge in the 2010s, the importance of actors was already underlined. In Philipp Sarasin’s seminal article ‘Was ist Wissensgeschichte?’ (2011), knowledge actors

(*Akteure des Wissens*) are singled out as one of the main analytical orientations in the history of knowledge. According to Sarasin, a knowledge actor can be studied from a social-historical viewpoint, for example by analysing their social position and different forms of capital, but there are relatively many studies of this type and the risk is that we end up in a sociological reductionism if the research stops at that. ‘The roles of the various actors and agents of knowledge cannot be determined according to the old social-historical grid, but on the basis of an idea of the production and circulation of knowledge and the tasks and functions involved’, Sarasin argues. He further stresses that the study of knowledge actors should include the content and form of knowledge. In this way, a person’s ability and competence to act as a knowledge actor also depends on the theoretical and practical knowledge they possess or impart.⁷

Even though we share Sarasin’s general points about knowledge actors, we find it necessary to formulate a somewhat more precise definition. In this book, a knowledge actor is an analytical category that consists of those who, within a given historical context, contributed to the production and/or circulation of knowledge. Under certain circumstances, it is also reasonable to include different audiences in the actor concept; they then become co-creators in the knowledge process. Further, we consider it crucial to underline that cooperation between several actors is required for knowledge to be set in motion. The individuals or groups involved may vary from one epoch to another, and for historians of knowledge it is a matter of examining what these specific role distributions and constellations have looked like. Finally, it is important to explore what kind of identities and self-understandings that have been connected to these roles, and in what ways the knowledge actors understood their own positions.

Expanding agency

How to analyse knowledge actors? In this venture, historians of knowledge need not start from scratch. Even though historical actors have been somewhat overshadowed by structural approaches, there are rich traditions of scholarship to draw on.

For example, discussions about the circulation of knowledge have highlighted the need for an expanded understanding of actors and agency. In this respect, Lissa Roberts has emphasized that circulation should not be understood as something moving from a centre to a local context and then returning to its starting point. She argues that instead it should be used to get away from 'privileged positions taken for granted', such as European metropolises and learned associations.⁸ In the same spirit, Kapil Raj has underlined that the strength of the circulation perspective is that it gives agency to everyone involved in a knowledge process. By this, he by no means implies that the power and opportunities of the historical actors were evenly distributed, but he stresses that a circulation analysis is a fruitful way to empirically examine these power relationships, rather than assuming there was a certain dominance relationship and that these consistently expressed themselves in certain specific ways.⁹

Raj and other scholars have developed a vocabulary for analysing a wider repertoire of actors. With concepts such as 'go-betweens', 'intermediaries', and 'knowledge brokers', they have been able to capture the dynamics and hierarchies in various knowledge processes.¹⁰ Their starting point has often been colonial connections; their ambition, to problematize the relationship between alleged centres and peripheries. However, the concepts can also be used in other contexts, for example to show the diversity of actors involved in the production and circulation of knowledge.

The roles of go-betweens and translators of knowledge have been discussed by other historians. Simone Lässig has emphasized the role of young people and children as knowledge actors when investigating immigrant communities in the US. She has pointed out that children, who were often 'comfortable in multiple cultural contexts, were able

to translate between cultures and, what is more, to produce new knowledge'.¹¹ Having to acquire social knowledge and adapting to multiple social milieus, Lässig writes, the knowledge strategies and practices of migrant groups ought to be studied further. In a similar fashion, Björn Lundberg has argued that pupils must be regarded as important actors when it came to creating an awareness of global issues in the 1960s. He shows how school campaigns contributed by setting knowledge in motion.¹²

In many historical studies of knowledge actors, the power perspective is central. Within the history of science, for example, there has been a feminist current for several decades. Researchers such as Susan Leigh Star and Margaret Rossiter were among those who took an early interest in what gender structures looked like among academics. Several gender historical studies have since shown how the traditional male professor has depended on other knowledge actors to carry out his work, often virtually invisible women. In the natural sciences, typical examples were laboratory assistants who assisted the male professor, but who were not mentioned once the epoch-making scientific publication was released.¹³ A particular variant of this social order, common well into the post-war period, was 'the scientific family'. Within the framework of marriage, the man and woman could perform a scientific teamwork, but there was no doubt about who was superior and enjoyed the prestige, although the woman often also had a solid academic education. For a long time, there was also an expectation that a professor's wife would not only help her husband as an assistant or secretary, but also take on the role of hostess at dinners and other representative functions in the home.¹⁴ Donna Haraway's tenets, emphasizing the situated, embodied nature of knowledge, draw further attention to the need to critically engage with the subjugated when claiming that 'there is good reason to believe vision is better from below the brilliant space platforms of the powerful'.¹⁵

These approaches and frameworks are just a few examples of how knowledge actors can be studied; in reality, there is a plethora of other possible analytical options and directions, as this book will show.

Our goal here is to foster a larger discussion among historians of knowledge about the role of knowledge actors. Do we want individuals and networks to take centre stage in our research and our narratives? And if so, which ones do we want to highlight and how are we to conduct our research? What are the potential blind spots and pitfalls of pursuing this actor-centric trajectory? Questions such as these will never find a definite answer. However, we believe that by gathering a diverse group of scholars to reflect on them from the vantage point of their own research, we can move the discussion forward and lay a common foundation for better and more informed research.

In general historiographical terms, we are convinced that the time is ripe for re-engaging with historical actors and the action they took in the past. New digital methods and OCR-searchable archives have strengthened a current in contemporary historiography of emphasizing linguistic and conceptual change rather than scrutinizing and situating the doings of individual historical actors. Distant reading and topic modelling enables new lines of research, but it hardly makes traditional methods and perspectives obsolete. As several digital historians have pointed out, if one wants to explain and understand how people changed the course of history by their actions, word clouds and big data will not suffice.¹⁶

This volume is divided into three parts. The first part centres on ‘Roles and communities’, in which the essays shed light on the social networks of knowledge and the multifaceted ways knowledge actors engage with others. The second part, ‘Capabilities and constraints’, explores the possibilities and hindrances which knowledge actors face. In the third part, ‘Conditions and connections’, the essays address the prerequisites for producing and circulating knowledge, including the historian’s own situated practice and methodological challenges.

Roles and communities

The first group of essays shows knowledge actors in a multitude of roles, their activities embedded in various communities. To produce and circulate knowledge, no knowledge actor is an island. This inter-

connectedness is on display in studies of experimental glass artists, nineteenth-century primary schoolteachers, late medieval theologians, post-war children's television producers, and contemporary personal finance bloggers. This broad chronological range points to the trans-historical relevance of studying knowledge actors as embedded in—and shaping—larger social contexts.

In the first essay, Sven Dupré considers the diversity of artistic identities in relation to the plurality of artisanal epistemologies. He focuses on the tension inherent in artists' self-identification and self-denial as knowledge actors. On the one hand, artists self-identified with a diversity of techniques, comparable to how 'method' is an important quality in the literature on scholarly personae in the history of the humanities. Yet artists—sometimes the same artists—resisted the identity of knowledge actor. Dupré investigates this tension and the question of why artists self-identified and denied the knowledge actor label by discussing the case of the post-Second World War studio glass movement originating in the US. Members of the studio glass movement self-identified as saviours of lost knowledge who also prided themselves on openly sharing knowledge; and they also resisted the label of knowledge actors, being purposefully 'experimental'.

Johannes Westberg addresses nineteenth- and early twentieth-century primary schoolteachers. Examining them as multifaceted knowledge actors, this essay examines the roles in knowledge production and distribution that their training and social position enabled them to take. Using the concept of knowledge broker as a conceptual key, he suggests a preliminary typology of four roles that teachers took as knowledge actors outside the classroom: the teacher as (i) private lecturer and teacher; (ii) author, researcher, and journalist; (iii) administrative assistant; and (iv) politician. Although these roles have remained neglected in contrast to teachers' work in classrooms, this essay further inspires studies examining the multiple roles of knowledge actors. Teachers were not the only profession to combine their main employment with that of author, researcher, administrator, or politician.

Christa Lundberg explores how a history of knowledge focused on identifying structures—such as hierarchies, systems, and cartographies—squares with the study of individual knowers. One way of bringing these together, she suggests, is to consider epistemic hierarchies from the individual viewpoint. She tests this approach on Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples (c.1460–1536) by investigating his relationship to the epistemic hierarchies of early sixteenth-century Paris. She argues that Lefèvre disagreed with the dominant epistemic model in this environment, the curriculum of the University of Paris, and challenged it in his own teaching, philosophical writings, and editorial work. Lefèvre thus played a curatorial function in relation to epistemic hierarchies, subtly reshaping them in the way he selected and presented texts. Lundberg concludes that studying 'curators of knowledge'—a category that can comprise actors from librarians to teachers and healthcare workers—adds a useful complementary perspective to large-scale cartographic projects in the history of knowledge.

Helle Strandgaard Jensen focuses on the formation of knowledge in a transnational community of television producers. In 1968, 1970, and 1972, a European Broadcasting Union's subcommittee for children's programmes held workshops where representatives from member states helped promote a highly interactive, engaged sharing of knowledge about their various national production practices. The essay uses a history of knowledge approach to challenge the existing literature on television productions for children in two ways. In contrast to existing work that has focused on national institutions and individuals, it explores the impact of children's television history on knowledge formation among an entire community of knowledge actors that went beyond national borders.

David Larsson Heidenblad and Charlotte Nilsson engage with how lay actors position themselves as knowledge authorities in relation to existing institutions and competing knowledge claims. Their study zooms in on the intricate dynamics of the personal finance blogosphere by analysing Sweden's largest platform, RikaTillsammans ('Rich Together'), run by the married couple Jan and Caroline Bolmeson. The essay shows knowledge actors in this digital sphere of popular

capitalism build legitimacy, credibility, and engagement not by their formal qualifications but by showing they are everyman investors—like their followers. They form a ‘neoliberal community’ with their audience that is sceptical of established financial institutions and arrangements, yet deeply committed to financial markets and the business world as the basis for individual safety and freedom.

Capabilities and constraints

The essays in the second part of the book grapple with what knowledge actors could and could not do, and the extent to which they got scholarly recognition as active agents. By adopting a global gaze, inequalities, marginalization, migration, and differing knowledge systems come to the fore. Yet, the essays also shed light on that many groups and individuals—such as servants, slaves, non-western economists, and female scholars—have had more agency than is commonly assumed. In this way, the essays problematize and challenge what a knowledge actor is.

Maria Bach questions the boundaries that define who a knowledge actor can be. She uncovers marginalized actors who are seldom analysed—the individuals who were part of dialogues and produced speeches or texts, but were largely ignored in their time and often after. Bach provides an empirical example from the first generation of modern Indian economists, who worked within an imperial setting and were treated as inferior, while their audience, who were mainly British, were considered superior. As marginalized knowledge actors in the ongoing debates around Indian progress and development, the Indian economists of the late nineteenth century were often labelled as copiers of existing economic knowledge from Western Europe and North America (and indeed still are). Bach’s intervention offers a new perspective on the history of development economics and identifies several examples of redefinition, refraction, or hybrid theories in Indian economics.

Anna Nilsson Hammar and Svante Norrhem consider phronetic knowledge using the example of employees on aristocratic estates in

seventeenth-century Sweden. Using petitions written to their master, these employees negotiated their positions, possible advantages, and their conditions within a complex organization comprising many estates, and a system for compensation built around deferred wages and long-term credit relationships. The examples show that employees had an extensive knowledge of the system in which they were forced to work. They carefully tailored their demands, suggestions, and pleas for help within this context, revealing their knowledge of how to keep track of spending, taxes, and credit relationships, in certain cases spanning generations. More than anything, Nilsson Hammar and Norrhem show that employees did in fact act to solve immanent problems or to secure prospects for themselves and their families and relatives, and that both knowledge and practical judgement was used to strengthen their arguments.

Lisa Hellman discusses the history of knowledge in light of the global turn. Inviting other perspectives and case studies than those already centre stage, there is potential friction in combining the two fields. In her essay, Hellman considers the actor-centred perspective, the concept of circulation, and the concept of knowledge. When the history of knowledge includes actors from various regions of the world, it must be careful not to lose sight of the power dynamics in knowledge-making. This point is even more apparent when considering circulation and its relationship to ideas of agency and choice. Here Hellman underlines the importance of taking coerced actors into account. She raises the question of how to keep coherence and stringency within the bounds of the history of knowledge while taking seriously non-European—and possibly conflicting—conceptualizations of knowledge.

Ning de Coninck-Smith explores in microhistorical and biographical detail the academic journeys of two Danish women, Grethe Hjort (1903–1967) and Johanne Stochholm (1894–1976). She shows how material mediators, such as women-only colleges, personal networks, and testimonials, matched with immaterial mediators such as aspirations and affections, helped the circulation of knowledge about academic positions across continents. The essay makes

use of an imaginative archive, which according to Clare Hemmings ‘seeks to tell the unsayable and imagine what cannot be retrieved’ in reflecting on the many questions about the entanglement of private and professional lives.

Conditions and connections

The third group of essays engages with the underlying conditions for producing and circulating knowledge in the past and in the present. By investigating connections between local practices and larger scientific enterprises—such as academies, conferences, journals, and professionally shared knowledge—the section shows how knowledge actors and institutions facilitated knowledge exchange and historical change. The essays point up the methodological issues, notably the employment of digital tools and the virtues of self-reflective practices for historians of knowledge.

Joel Barnes examines relations between the circulation of knowledge, knowledge actors and knowledge arenas, by considering counterpart categories in the history of the ‘multiple discovery’ in the natural sciences. Multiple discovery—long a preoccupation of historians and sociologists of science—is when two or more researchers are said to have simultaneously made a discovery or devised an invention. Throughout the twentieth century, multiple discovery was typically explained in terms of competing social theories that emphasized either knowledge circulation or the agency of scientific actors. Only in recent decades have historians of science shifted attention to publishing and communication technologies and practices—what historians of knowledge would consider the ‘arenas’ of scientific knowledge. The essay shows how histories of the theorization of categories closely comparable to circulation, actors, and arenas in adjacent fields can contribute to understandings of those categories in the history of knowledge.

Jacob Orrje discusses the use of digital methods in actor-centric histories of knowledge. Using two examples, he considers how different digital approaches have implications for history writing.

Distant reading seems to promise automatization and an opportunity to write history using big data; however, such statistically based methods encourage a more structuralist approach to history, where words become the object of enquiry, and they are thus often difficult to reconcile with the research practices of actor-centric historians. Historians of knowledge might thus benefit more from qualitative digital methods that enable the reconstruction of detailed contexts using annotated sources and interactive maps—consisting, for example, of itineraries, power relationships, or the movement of concepts. Orrje also argues for a less monolithic approach to digital history and that historians should be mindful of how diverse digital approaches integrate with their way of writing history.

Thomas Mougey explores the role of conference organizers as facilitators of knowledge circulation. Focusing on the work of Charles-Marie Gariel, the director of the Service des Congrès for the Paris Expositions Universelles of 1889 and 1900, he highlights a category of actor who was not engaged in the actual act of knowledge circulation, but rather engineered the conditions enabling it. Mougey shows how Gariel tried to reconfigure, strengthen, and routinize the burgeoning practice of international conferencing as an arena of knowledge circulation. He shows infrastructure to be less an external context than a set of purposefully produced conditions of circulation, which mould the knowledge being circulated as much as the actors involved. By retrieving the agenda undergirding Gariel's guidelines, this essay also contributes to highlight the politics of knowledge circulation.

Christa Wirth suggests that historians of knowledge should reflect on their roles as knowledge actors. Historians of knowledge not only study knowledge actors in the past, but they are also knowledge actors themselves. Taking her cue from programmatic texts that come out of the history of knowledge, Wirth charts how scholars located themselves as knowledge actors to contribute to open, democratic, and pluralist societies. These knowledge actors go on to shape epistemologies, praxis, and institutions in specific ways. Wirth contends that against the current backdrop of a global pandemic and the erosion of democracy, the whole business of agnostic historians reporting on the ebb and

flow of knowledge regimes in the past without having a stake in them is not only ethically problematic, but epistemologically naive.

The conversation continues

This third and final volume of the LUCK trilogy on the history of knowledge ends with an essay by Peter Burke, a historian whose career spans the birth of the new cultural history in the 1970s to the emergence of the history of knowledge in the early 2000s and beyond. Drawing on his immense erudition, he situates the twelve essays of the present volume and their call to revisit actors in historical scholarship. By connecting ongoing trends to larger historiographical currents, Burke brings a breadth and depth to the dynamic discussions among the growing international community of historians of knowledge. The conversation continues.

Notes

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- 2 An overview is provided in Peter Burke, *What is the History of Knowledge?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016).
- 3 Suzanne Marchand, 'Weighing Context and Practices: Theodor Mommsen and the Many Dimensions of Nineteenth-Century Humanistic Knowledge', *History & Theory* 59/4 (2020), 144–5.
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- Journal of Environmental Planning and Management* 62/1 (2019); Ronald L. Jepperson & John W. Meyer, *Institutional Theory: The Cultural Construction of Organizations, States, and Identities* (Cambridge: CUP, 2021).
- 7 Philipp Sarasin, 'Was ist Wissensgeschichte?' *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte in der deutschen Literatur* 36/1 (2011), 169–70; see also Johan Östling, 'Vad är kunskaphistoria?' *Historisk Tidskrift* 135/1 (2015); Simone Lässig, 'The History of Knowledge and the Expansion of the Historical Research Agenda', *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 59 (2016); Philipp Sarasin, 'More Than Just Another Speciality: On the Prospects for the History of Knowledge', *Journal for the History of Knowledge* 1/1 (2020).
 - 8 Lissa Roberts, 'Situating Science in Global History: Local Exchanges and Networks of Circulation', *Itinerario* 33/1 (2009), 18.
 - 9 Kapil Raj, 'Beyond Postcolonialism ... and Postpositivism: Circulation and the Global History of Science', *Isis* 104/2 (2013).
 - 10 Kapil Raj, 'Go-Betweens, Travelers, and Cultural Translators', in Bernard Lightman (ed.), *A Companion to the History of Science* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2016); Paula Findlen (ed.), *Empires of Knowledge: Scientific Networks in the Early Modern World* (New York: Routledge, 2018).
 - 11 Lässig, 'History of Knowledge', 30.
 - 12 Björn Lundberg, 'Youth Activism and Global Awareness: The Emergence of the Operation "Dagsverke" Campaign in 1960s Sweden', *Contemporary European History* 1–15 (2022).
 - 13 Susan Leigh Star, 'The Sociology of the Invisible: The Primacy of Work in the Writings of Anselm Strauss', in David R. Maines (ed.), *Social Organization and Social Process: Essays in Honor of Anselm Strauss* (Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter, 1991); Margaret W. Rossiter, *Women Scientists in America before Affirmative Action, 1940–1972* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).
 - 14 Annika Berg, Christina Florin & Per Wisselgren (eds.), *Par i vetenskap och politik: Intellektuella äktenskap i moderniteten* (Umeå: Borea, 2011).
 - 15 Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies* 14/3 (1988), 583.
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