

Conceptualising the production and diffusion of Useful and reliable knowledge in Early Modern Europe

URKEW Project

LSE, Room D109

17th January 2011

Programme

9.30 - 9.45	Welcome and Introduction Patrick O'Brien and Simona Valeriani (convenors)
9.45 -10.15	Pamela Long (Independent Scholar) <i>Trading Zones and the Transformations of "Useful Knowledge" in Fifteenth and Sixteenth Century Europe</i>
10.15-11.00	Discussion
11.00-11.15	<i>Break</i>
11.15-11.45	Karel Davids (Amsterdam) <i>Knowledge and Power: Who defined Useful Knowledge in Early Modern Europe ?</i>
11.45-12.30	Discussion
12.30-2.00	<i>Common Lunch</i>
2.00-2.30	Lissa Roberts (Twente) <i>Embodiment, accumulation and management: three crucial issues for thinking about the production and diffusion of 'useful and reliable knowledge'</i>
2.30-3.15	Discussion
3.15- 3.30	<i>Break</i>
3.30- 5.00	Roundtable (Chaired by P. O'Brien): Maxine Berg (Warwick) Patrick O'Brien (LSE) Ian Inkster (Nottingham Trent) Marcus Popplow (Salzburg)

Topics for Discussion

1. Useful and Reliable Knowledge Historicised

The notion that certain pieces of information, the understanding of particular phenomena or a set of skills would be useful to have has characterised every society at any time. Nevertheless the expression “useful and reliable knowledge” is relatively recent and the way in which was developed in the 19th century shapes, to some extent, our notion of it. It seems important, in the frame of the UKEW project, to try and historicise this concept and think, also from a methodological point of view, about how to identify, contextualise and interpret what was considered to be useful knowledge in a specific culture at a specific time.

2. Generating and Harnessing URK-

The relationship between social, political and intellectual Elites and the groups generating Useful and Reliable Knowledge

Historically we often find that the individuals and groups actually generating useful knowledge are not necessarily identical with those holding politically, socially and economically important positions. Nevertheless the latter undoubtedly influence - directly or indirectly- the kind of knowledge produced. They exercise this function not only as patrons but also in many other ways, such as generating the social and economic demand for specific kinds of knowledge, actively ostracising or encouraging branches of production and of scholarly activity, shaping and “modelling” a specific way of looking at nature and its malleability, dispensing (or not) social recognition and prestige etc.

The latter point brings us to two further topics: the question of trust and the problem of the elites’ openness or closeness. How is trust acquired and trustworthiness assessed/ granted? How easy is it for members of the URK producing groups to become - formally or informally- members of the elite?

3. The Relationship Knowledge-Technique

Useful and reliable knowledge can assume the form of a piece of propositional knowledge, a theory, a piece of procedural knowledge or a skill etc. When thinking about the development of a new technique, the acquisition of existing ones and their transmission to subsequent generations we need to consider that each one of these activities implies a complex relationship with different kinds of useful knowledge.

Questions we might explore in this context are:

- What knowledge is brought to bear when inventing/developing a new technique?
- Who has access to what knowledge?
- Through which conduits?