

SPECIAL ISSUE

## Introduction: Histories of Ignorance

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This introduction discusses the essays in this special issue in terms of ongoing changes in the historical study of knowledge. It addresses the challenges posed by the history of knowledge to the history of science and by the history of ignorance to the history of knowledge. It also discusses some of the central topics, themes, and issues at stake in studying the history of the production and circulation of ignorance.

This article is part of a special issue entitled "Histories of Ignorance," edited by Lukas M. Verburgt and Peter Burke.

**Keywords:** history of knowledge; history of ignorance; ignorance studies; agnotology

The essays in this special issue of the *Journal for the History of Knowledge* offer a programmatic *tour d'horizon* of the history of ignorance, mostly focused on eighteenth- to twenty-first-century Europe. What they show is that ignorance is more than a simple negative of knowledge and that ignorance—like knowledge, objectivity, facts, truth, scholarly virtues, etc.—has a history of its own, albeit a slightly stranger one. In fact, together the essays suggest that, in order to fully understand human knowledge's past, one also needs to trace why and how some things were or have been deemed to be unknown or unknowable and some individuals or groups unknowledgeable.

Despite its title, *histories* of ignorance are really histories of *ignorances* in the plural. Within each given epoch and each given culture, there are different kinds of ignorance at play. It is a challenge—historically, historiographically, and philosophically speaking—to fit all these pieces together. It is an even greater challenge to see how each of them, let alone all of them together, connect to the *knowledges*, both scientific and humanistic, whose histories are currently being published in leading history of science journals. We have no pretensions in this regard. Our scope is limited mostly to the "modern, Western science" from which the history of knowledge is trying to free itself. And our relatively modest aim is to contribute to the development of the history of ignorance through new—rich and thought-provoking—contributions, ranging from historical case studies to historiographical reflections. An important step in this direction, as far as the Anglophone world is concerned, was taken by Cornel Zwierlein's *The Dark Side of Knowledge*, which focused on the early modern period.<sup>1</sup> More recently, expanding the time-frame both backward and forward, Renate Dürr has edited a volume on *Threatened Knowledge: Practices of Knowing and Ignoring from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century*.<sup>2</sup> We believe that in spite of its limited scope and modest aim this special issue nonetheless offers something ambitious: it finds in the historical study of ignorance an opening for the history of knowledge to be more than an expansion of the history of science. It makes it possible to tell the story of "modern, Western science" differently, which seems a better strategy than abandoning this story with the unfortunate result of remaining "implicitly defined" by it.<sup>3</sup> It also suggests replacing the "vague and baggy" concept of knowledge with the notion of *epistemic hierarchy*, ranking kinds of knowledges and ignorances as well as saying what is (un)knowable and who is (un)knowledgeable in a given epoch and culture.<sup>4</sup> This seems to fit much better with the insight that, instead of trying to define

<sup>1</sup> Zwierlein, *Dark Side of Knowledge*.

<sup>2</sup> Dürr, *Threatened Knowledge*.

<sup>3</sup> Daston, "History of Knowledge," 144.

<sup>4</sup> Burke, "Response," 2.

knowledge by separating it from ignorance, it is more fruitful to investigate their changing boundaries and mutual constitution as well as their “dialectical relationship and interconnections.”<sup>5</sup>

None of these points are established in this special issue; nor are their implications for the history of knowledge explicitly thought through.<sup>6</sup> Instead, our main aim has been to highlight the richness and diversity of the history of ignorance, of which the essays—a collective *Wunderkammer*—are a showcase, and to call for its further elaboration in different contexts. For this reason, we have allowed ignorance to be conceived very broadly, covering various basic epistemic categories belonging to non-knowledge, including doubt, failure, error, and forgetting. There is no doubt that a full-blown history of ignorance, if there will ever be such a thing, will have to be more restrictive and precise. We believe that for the time being this would be premature. A first step in its creation is to show that it is possible and that it is worthwhile. We hope for the essays in this special issue to be instrumental in taking this step.

What we would like to do in this introduction is threefold. First, we offer a brief account of the recent development of the history of knowledge and consider its relation to the history of ignorance. Second, we provide a cursory overview of the historical literature on ignorance, reflecting on its rationale as well as its prospects and problems. Third, we scratch the surface of what kinds of ignorance are studied in this literature and how they are studied and suggest connections to several other fields, such as sociology, economics, anthropology, and philosophy. We end with some summarizing remarks on the essays and tentative suggestions for future research.

## The History of Knowledge and the History of Ignorance

Most readers of this journal will know that the field of the history of knowledge—it is perhaps too early to talk of a discipline—has seen very rapid growth over the past few years. It now has its own centers, journals, book series, and research positions and has already been hailed as “the field for the twenty-first century.”<sup>7</sup> For all the strategic rhetoric of novelty, the field has roots in several existing disciplines and traditions, including the German *Wissensgeschichte*, the French *lieux de savoir*, and the Nordic *kunskapshistoria*.<sup>8</sup> One of us has shown how it developed out of other kinds of histories: the history of the book and the history of science.<sup>9</sup> Others have doubted whether the field is new at all.<sup>10</sup> For all the inspiring enthusiasm, workers in the field have, indeed, been struggling to define what it is and, especially, what it is not. Some have taken a pragmatic stance: the concept of “knowledge” clearly has enough appeal to bring historians together and to produce fruitful collaboration.<sup>11</sup> Many others have taken the disciplinary soul-searching more seriously. The focus of the discussion has been the history of knowledge’s relation to the older discipline of the history of science. In brief, the field could be said to be the outcome of the explosion of the history of science’s subject matter, owing to the widening of its geography and chronology.<sup>12</sup> This is both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, it could well be argued that “some version of the history of knowledge, of which the history of science is a part, is probably indispensable.”<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, so long as the field remains strangely tied to the history of science—covering what falls outside the traditional scope of this discipline while continuing to legitimize itself with reference to it—the search for a positive definition of its objects and ambitions will be hard, if not hopeless. At this point, several strategies suggest themselves. One strategy is to accept that the history of knowledge is essentially, or at least primarily, a background against which the history of science can be better understood.<sup>14</sup> Another strategy is to shift the responsibility of defining what knowledge is to the historical actors with all the problems that this historicism brings in its wake.<sup>15</sup> Yet another strategy is for the history of knowledge to pay much more attention to the conceptual analysis of the category of knowledge, either pluralizing it (into knowledges) or enlarging it (such that it includes, say, rules, laws, and codes) and/or embedding it into a more encompassing concept (systems, orders, or cultures of knowledge).<sup>16</sup> A final one

<sup>5</sup> Lässig, “History of Knowledge,” 39.

<sup>6</sup> One of us has recently taken up this task. See Verburgt, “History of Knowledge.”

<sup>7</sup> Dupré and Somsen, “History of Knowledge,” 197.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Sarasin, “Was ist Wissensgeschichte?”; Jacob, *Lieu de savoir*; and Östling, “Vad är kunskapshistoria?”

<sup>9</sup> See Burke, *History of Knowledge?*

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Marchand, “How Much Knowledge?”

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Bergwik and Holmberg, “Standing on Whose Shoulders?”

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Daston, “History of Knowledge”; and Renn, “History of Knowledge.”

<sup>13</sup> Daston, “History of Knowledge,” 145.

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Renn, “History of Knowledge.”

<sup>15</sup> See the exchange between Martin Mulsow and Lorraine Daston in Mulsow, “History of Knowledge.”

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Elshakry, “Singular History of Knowledge.”

is to emancipate the history of knowledge from the history of science altogether.<sup>17</sup> This could either mean doing something *different* from the history of science or doing the history of science *differently*, or preferably both. One might experiment with new objects of study, like spatial or temporal perceptions of knowledge or what has been called the “emotional inner life of knowledge,” as well as with new methods or narratives, searching for alternative ways to tell standard stories and for alternatives to grand narratives.<sup>18</sup> For instance, science’s past might be re-written as the history of a negative attitude towards local ways of knowing.

We believe that the history of ignorance has a lot to offer in this regard. Its integration into the history of knowledge may allow the field to be emancipated from the history of science, not merely by extending what it has already done (e.g., to generalize what counts as science) but by doing something that seems to be fundamentally at odds with it (e.g., to study ignorance as something more than the opposite, absence, or lack of scientific knowledge). This would mean that historians would follow in the footsteps of anthropologists, sociologists, and philosophers who have all recently made an “ignorance turn,” challenging some of their discipline’s traditions.<sup>19</sup>

The historical study of ignorance, indeed, seems to challenge several long-standing and deeply ingrained assumptions about the development of scientific knowledge. Perhaps the most central one is that knowledge and ignorance are diametrically opposed so that as the former increases the latter decreases and that this is good because ignorance is something bad to be overcome. Other ones include the notion of science as our foremost producer of knowledge—and, ipso facto, our chief destroyer of ignorance—and the vision that in the sciences there is no *ignoramus et ignorabimus*, no “we do not know and will not know,” as Emil Du Bois-Reymond put it.<sup>20</sup> It is not an exaggeration to say that such assumptions were born with the modern sciences themselves in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and canonized in the work of those who began to chronicle and write their histories. They are still pertinent today. Think, for example, of the question of whether science can save a humanity faced with climate change and massive species extinction. Some say that scientists already know all we need to know to fix these problems. Others anticipate feats of technical ingenuity that will allow us to geo-engineer ourselves out of our current crisis. Such positions tend to neglect the examples that show that science—at least an increasingly politicized and commercialized one—is also a “producer of ignorance,” that new scientific knowledge always leads to “new horizons of what is unknown” and that ignorance is, as Hans-Jörg Rheinberger has forcefully shown in his oeuvre, at the heart of scientific inquiry.<sup>21</sup>

It is also outside science that ignorance, both as such and in its relation to knowledge, can no longer be overlooked or reduced to a phenomenon that simply needs to be overcome. One example is that of recent strategies to improve public confidence in science. Another is that of the creation of what is sometimes called “non-knowledge (il)literacy.”<sup>22</sup> At a yet more fundamental level, as case studies from anthropology and sociology, like Maria Alexopoulou’s in this issue, show, ignorance—like knowledge—is an important source of power. Moreover, both the distinction between what is and what isn’t knowable and the labeling of certain forms of knowledge as inferior, illegitimate, irrelevant, or “merely local” are the result of power relations. Brian Balmer, in his essay on Cold War politics, and Claudia Aradau and Tobias Blanke, in their joint essay on what they call algorithmic surveillance, show that ignorance has a political life of its own.

These considerations also pertain to the meta-level of historiography, that is, to the level of how history is written and how the present is historicized. Peter Wehling, in the present issue, shows how and why ignorance, as an historical object, sits uncomfortably with the tradition of the history of science. Following a long line of twentieth- and twenty-first-century research, his essay traces the controversial shaping of ignorance as a counter-history of science. One of us adds to Wehling’s story by considering in what sense the focus on ignorance makes for a counter-history of the present, for instance, in the form of the so-called Agnotocene as an alternative for the all-present Anthropocene concept. As always, changes in the present prompt historians to look at the past in new ways or to historicize the present differently—hoping that these ways will enable them to write new histories of the present. Hence, it is possible to ask: What is it about ignorance, in its various forms and shapes, that makes it such a timely phenomenon to historicize? Or, vice

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Burke, “Response”; and Verburt, “History of Knowledge.”

<sup>18</sup> See Connor, *Madness of Knowledge*.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Dillely and Kirsch, *Regimes of Ignorance*; McGoey, *Sociology of Ignorance*; and Peels and Blaauw, *Epistemic Dimension of Ignorance*.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Kourany and Carrier, “Introducing the Issues.”

<sup>21</sup> Kourany, “Science,” 155; Gross and McGoey, “Introduction,” 1. See also, for instance, Rheinberger, *History of Epistemic Things*, where he first presented technical instruments as “generators of surprise” and experimental set-ups as opening up unforeseen directions.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Ibsch and Hobson, “Blindspots and Sustainability.”

versa: What is it about our time that makes ignorance key to a history of the present? And, to use Francois Hartog's terminology, what does a historicized ignorance mean for our current "regime of historicity," that is, for views of the relations between the past, the present, and the future and for how these condition historical writing?<sup>23</sup>

These and other questions are arguably key to the development of the history of knowledge. More specifically, they bear directly upon the prominent idea that it is the field for the 2020s and beyond. We concur with this ambition, if it also means that ignorance is included in the big picture of humanity's epistemic development as well as in the *histoire totale*—which studies its past and contains lessons for its long-term future. If knowledge is the answer to ignorance, then it is high time for us to end our ignorance of ignorance. Or, as Jerome R. Ravetz wrote back in 1993: "If we are to overcome the sin of ignorance-squared, we must reestablish the relationship between knowledge and ignorance that results from all human endeavors, including science."<sup>24</sup>

## Discovering Ignorance

We live at the time of the discovery of ignorance, at least its discovery in the academic world. Yuval Harari's best-seller *Sapiens* contains an entire chapter on "the discovery of ignorance" (in the sense of knowing what one does not know). A select group of scholars in different disciplines was already studying obstacles to knowledge in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as Wehling points out in his article. A few more scholars published articles or books on the subject between the mid-twentieth century and its end. However, since the 1980s and still more since the year 2000, we have witnessed a rise of "ignorance studies" or even a boom in the subject, led (as in the case of the history of knowledge) by a new generation of historians of science. An international handbook took stock of the situation in these studies in 2015.<sup>25</sup> It addresses major problems that are shared by a large number of disciplines—the value of ignorance, for instance, its relation to power, decision-making in conditions of uncertainty—while the contributors come from sociology, economics, psychology, anthropology, law, feminist studies, geography, biology, linguistics, journalism, and even literature. If Hegel was right about the owl of Minerva, this explosion would be a reason for optimism.

The discipline of general history, on the other hand, is not represented among the fifty-one (!) contributions to the *Handbook*. Despite the fact that the progress from ignorance to knowledge was a major theme in histories published in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—most notably the Marquis de Condorcet's *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (1795)—historians have been slow to join the conversation generated by the recent boom. The obvious exception to this rule are intellectual historians, who have long been interested in the history of the idea of ignorance (especially "learned ignorance") and in the long history of skepticism.<sup>26</sup> The classic study of the latter subject was written by an American, Richard Popkin (1923–2005), a philosopher turned historian of ideas. His book originally ranged from Erasmus to Descartes, but as the author made more and more discoveries, later editions of the book went back to Savonarola as well as onwards to Spinoza and Bayle.

Today, however, other kinds of historians are beginning to join in the collective enterprise. Indeed, they are now making up for lost time. In the year 2010, for instance, a collective volume was published on the subject of "nescience" (*Nichtwissen*) in the Enlightenment; in 2016, 2020 and 2021, respectively, Zwierlein's *The Dark Side of Knowledge: Histories of Ignorance, 1400–1800*, Alain Corbin's *Terra Incognita: Une histoire de l'ignorance XVIIIe-XIXe siècle* and Dürr's *Threatened Knowledge* appeared.<sup>27</sup> Over the past ten years or so, myriad studies have been published that focus on the history of different kinds of ignorance in the contexts of diplomacy, empire, and geography as well as early modern administrative practices, science, literature, and the arts.<sup>28</sup> The time has come to survey this new field as well as to contribute to it and to consider what historians might write about it in the near future, offering an equivalent for historians to a recent collective volume on the anthropology of knowledge and ignorance.<sup>29</sup> This special issue takes an important step in this direction.

<sup>23</sup> See Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity*.

<sup>24</sup> Ravetz, "The Sin of Science," 163.

<sup>25</sup> See Gross and McGoey, *Handbook of Ignorance Studies*.

<sup>26</sup> See Duclow, *Masters of Learned Ignorance*; Popkin, *History of Scepticism* and revised editions.

<sup>27</sup> See Adler and Godel, *Formen des Nichtwissens*. The English-language edition of Corbin's book has recently appeared at Wiley.

<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, Espenhorst, *Unwissen und Missverständnisse*; and Zwierlein, *Imperial Unknowns*.

<sup>29</sup> See Dilley and Kirsch, *Regimes of Ignorance*.

## Studying Ignorance

It is one thing to argue that we *should* study ignorance historically and to observe *that* the history of ignorance is being studied. It is quite another to see whether and if so, how we can study it. What does it mean to take up ignorance as an object of historical study? Wehling's essay in this issue provides an in-depth, historically informed discussion of answers to this question. Our aim is here merely to scratch the theoretical surface.

The traditional definition of ignorance as the absence or lack of knowledge confronts us with the challenge of writing the history of something that isn't there.<sup>30</sup> There are three main responses to this challenge. The first is to view the history of knowledge from retrospective hindsight, accepting that ignorance is only where knowledge is not. Each scientific discovery, for instance, tells us something about what was previously unknown (or even deemed unknowable). Historians can examine the causes and wider implications of such ignorance. Some of these themes have been discussed for a long time in general history and in the history of science in particular, albeit in a way that is open to criticism. Here, the guiding idea has been that of historical progress, or what the British call the Whig interpretation of history. Leading figures in the Enlightenment and in the nineteenth century often described earlier periods as ages of ignorance, notably the early Middle Ages, viewed as the "Dark Ages," in contrast to later ages of the "light of reason." Martin Mulsow's *Prekäres Wissen* provides a crucial argument against this Whig view.<sup>31</sup> In brief, by putting forward a new approach oriented around the precarity of knowledge, Mulsow draws attention to the loss of knowledge. Winnerling, in this issue, adds to this approach, showing that and also how the loss of knowledge can be linked not only to material conditions (e.g., of manuscripts becoming illegible) but also to social processes of forgetting.

The second response to the challenge of writing a history of ignorance is to resist the tendency to reduce ignorance to the mere absence or lack of knowledge. As a result, it becomes possible to recognize different *kinds* of ignorance as well as to extend the definition of the subject and to include certainty, secrecy, errors, lies, and many other obstacles to knowledge under its broad umbrella. This is the approach taken by the historians of science Londa Schiebinger and Robert Proctor (who christened it "agnotology"), the sociologist Linsey McGoey, for whom a central concern is what she calls "strategic ignorance," and the feminist philosophers Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, who have studied issues of race, racism, and white privilege through the lens of an epistemology of ignorance.<sup>32</sup> In this special issue, Alexopoulou, Aradau and Blanke, Balmer, and Winnerling may be seen to pursue this approach. They each write about the "construction," "production," or "manufacture" of obstacles to and distortions of knowledge, whether through omission, algorithms, intelligence, or forgetting. This approach greatly enlarges the scope of the history of ignorance while making it much more focused: ignorance is differentiated, and different kinds of ignorance are identified and explored according to their motivations, perceptions, and side-effects, and their possible dynamic relations unpacked.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, those keen on precision might argue that what is produced is confusion or doubt rather than this or that kind of ignorance. For instance, citizens who are offered false information or no information at all on a particular topic do not become ignorant but continue to be so. (Indeed, one might ask whether what is described by the production of ignorance—and that of knowledge—captures what is essential to the processes involved).<sup>34</sup> Hence, it is not ignorance *per se*, but ignorance as a (willful or unintentional) means to a (strategic or unforeseen) end that seems to be at stake here.

There is also a third possible response. It holds that, since it is impossible to draw sharp contrasts between knowledge and ignorance, one can say neither that ignorance is absent when knowledge is present nor that ignorance itself may be studied independently of its relation to knowledge. Jajdelska and one of us pursue this route in this special issue. Jajdelska shows how knowledge, as reified in books, offers an entry point into ignorance, in this case, the asymmetrical ignorance of high-ranked and poor readers of different editions of the very same book. The third response may be said to take its cue from earlier approaches pursued by some anthropologists and sociologists (pioneers in the study of knowledge from the 1920s to the 1940s) as well as from the German-French tradition of historical epistemology, ranging from Ludwick Fleck, Gaston Bachelard to Michel Foucault.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps the central idea is that every "order" or "regime" of knowledge is always also a regime of ignorance: all cultures in all epochs cultivate knowledge and all erect a hierarchy not merely of more or less valued forms of knowledge and kinds of knowers but also of what is knowable (and

<sup>30</sup> See Frickel, "Absences."

<sup>31</sup> See Mulsow, *Prekäres Wissen*.

<sup>32</sup> See Proctor and Schiebinger, *Agnotology*; McGoey, *Unknowers*; McGoey, *Sociology of Ignorance*; Sullivan and Tuana, *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*.

<sup>33</sup> See Wilholt, "On Knowing"; and Gross, "Unknown in Process."

<sup>34</sup> See Stadler and Wulz, "Neben Feyerabend," for a critical discussion of the allegedly apolitical character of the history of knowledge.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Moore and Tumin, "Functions of Ignorance"; Lukasiewicz, *Ignorance Explosion*; and Bachelard, *Philosophy of No*.



what isn't) and by whom (and why).<sup>36</sup> In a famous formula, the American political scientist Harold Lasswell, who had already defined politics as "Who gets What, When, How," described the study of communication as that of "Who says What to Whom, through Which Channel, and with What Effect." For the study of ignorance, the formula might be adapted to read "Who is ignorant of What, When, Where, for What Reasons, with What Consequences, and eventually (so we hope) as part of What 'Epistemic Hierarchy.'" This brings us back to what we called the timeliness of ignorance, that is, to what it is about ignorance that makes its historical study so relevant to understanding the present and coping with the future. If, as some scholars have suggested, we live today in a time of an "explosion of knowledge" (in the double sense of expansion and fragmentation), we also live in a time of an "ignorance explosion" (again in a double sense). It is in this sense that the notion of an epistemic hierarchy of knowledge/ignorance seems to open up historical research to contemporary issues, for instance, those related to social epistemology and epistemic injustice, like epistemic oppression (i.e., the exclusion that hinders someone's contribution to knowledge production and blocks someone's access to the circulation of knowledge).<sup>37</sup>

## Challenges and Prospects

One of the major challenges to the history of knowledge is to (find out what it means to) be more than a mere expansion of the history of science, that is, to (understand what it implies to) move beyond the paradigm of "modern, Western science." The "tentative and still provisional" response has been to replace science by knowledge, which has given rise to another challenge, namely that of defining this—partly usefully and partly problematically vague—category.<sup>38</sup> We are well aware that this special issue does not resolve these challenges, if it could ever do such a thing: it is limited mainly to what is "modern," "Western," and "science" and, rather than narrowing down the history of knowledge's subject matter, it broadens it to include "ignorance." At the same time, we do believe that the essays are highly ambitious in another sense. First, they not only problematize a major but oft-forgotten assumption reflected in the words "modern, Western science"—that of the opposition between knowledge and ignorance—but also draw the contours of a different story about each of these words. Second, they suggest an alternative route of emancipation for the history of knowledge, one of a grand *histoire totale* that penetrates all other historical fields rather than a self-sustained discipline that seeks autonomy. A next step for the history of ignorance will be to widen its scope by focusing on contexts and topics far outside "modern, Western science." For example, it may study what could be called "everyday ignorance," that is, the (consequences of the) ignorance of flesh-and-blood decision-makers, be it rulers, merchants, CEOs, voters, or investors. It may also focus on the role of visions and conceptions of ignorance and unknowns in humanity's attempts to cope with its own possible extinction in the (near) future.<sup>39</sup> When taking up such contexts and topics, the challenge that emerges might well be that of finding out whether the history of ignorance needs to be emancipated from the history of knowledge. But this still lies far ahead. For now, we hope that this special issue will inspire historians from many different fields and backgrounds to contribute to the history of ignorance and, thereby, help work towards a history of knowledge that is ready for the 2020s and beyond.

## A Roadmap

The historical study of ignorance is as complex as the phenomenon of ignorance is diverse: it comes in many different kinds and with many different implications, which, in turn, vary across time and space. Rather than conceptual rigidity, this special issue advocates historical plurality. The benefit of this is that it highlights the richness of ignorance as an object of study for many historical sub-disciplines. The downside is that it is not always immediately obvious whether, and in what sense, the different essays contribute to one and the same central theme. For all their different approaches and backgrounds, the contributors, each in their own way, problematize the age-old view of ignorance as something bad to be overcome, as a merely temporary lack or absence of knowledge. Instead, they show that ignorance, understood in the wide sense of everything that belongs to non-knowledge, has a life of its own. As such, the essays contribute to the history of knowledge's ambition of studying epistemic boundaries and hierarchies. What is and what isn't a contribution to knowledge? How does knowledge relate to ignorance? Does ignorance have an epistemic dimension? Some of the essays show that ignorance can be studied on its own terms, independent from knowledge. Others

<sup>36</sup> Cf. the notion of the "dark side" of every paradigm in Burke, "Paradigms Lost."

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Dotson, "Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression."

<sup>38</sup> Daston, "History of Knowledge," 142.

<sup>39</sup> See Moynihan, *X-Risk*, for an account of the history of how humanity came to contemplate its own possible extinction.

focus on its role in knowledge production, be it positively or, in the case of Alexopoulou, negatively. Some approach ignorance in a contemporary political context, such as Balmer and Aradau and Blanke; others in the context of eighteenth-century readers of fiction (Jajdelska) and forgotten humanists (Winnerling). It is a formidable challenge to see how such strikingly different historical iterations of ignorance would fit together into a general history of ignorance, and it has not been our aim to meet it. As said, our hope is that this special issue will allow specialists in “ignorance studies,” itself a vibrantly multidisciplinary field, to converse with each other and for non-specialists to become acquainted with the strand that will most likely appeal to readers of this journal: the historical study of ignorance.

## Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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**How to cite this article:** Verburgt, Lukas M. and Peter Burke. "Introduction: Histories of Ignorance." *Journal for the History of Knowledge* 2, no. 1 (2021): 5, pp. 1–9. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/jhk.45>

**Submitted:** 01 October 2020

**Accepted:** 18 August 2021

**Published:** 29 November 2021

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