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BOOK REVIEW

Martin Mulsow. Knowledge Lost: A New View of Early Modern Intellectual History

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Knowledge Lost is a beautiful translation of a work that was originally published in 2012 as *Prekäres Wissen*. Readers of this journal who specialize in early modern history or who work on intellectual history of any era will want to explore this thrilling book for its methodological insights. When this book was first published, the history of knowledge was emerging in Germany as an alternative to intellectual history. *Prekäres Wissen* quickly became a classic in this new field. Intellectual history, or the history of how great men produced great ideas, had already been challenged by scholars working on subaltern epistemologies. In coruscating insights, unusual vantage points, and relentless salvos of critical questions, Mulsow simultaneously further knocked intellectual history sideways while also demonstrating a way forward.

By focusing on the "knowledge precariat" rather than the "knowledge bourgeoisie," Mulsow perches the history of knowledge on a tightrope rather than lodging it on a pedestal. In his account, not-so-great men produced knowledge that was often endangered. He highlights doubts, narrates emotions, and showcases the relation between power and knowledge production. This approach is more familiar to postcolonial and feminist historians such as Natalie Zemon Davis and Marisa Fuentes forced to read archives "against the grain." It had not been applied to intellectual history nor to the subjects who frequently feature in intellectual history: white, university-educated, and (usually) Christian men who have left behind copious sources. None of Mulsow's subjects were as marginalized in knowledge production as were women, non-Christians, and enslaved people. However, Mulsow's approach could be deployed to open up a broader view of the history of knowledge. Indeed, it already has. As Simone Lässig and Swen Steinberg have written, citing Mulsow's *Prekäres Wissen*, the history of knowledge "could open perspectives on forms of knowledge developed and used by groups outside the academic sphere … to historical forms of secret, impeded, and ignored knowledge, to knowledge that was revalued or delegitimized, to knowledge that was stripped of its relevance or declared non-knowledge" ("Knowledge on the Move: New Approaches Toward a History of Migrant Knowledge," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 43, no. 3 [2017]: 313–46, at 320).

By identifying precarious knowledge with the knowledge precariat, Mulsow's book might inspire several questions. Can sociopolitical and epistemic precariousness diverge? Can the weak create knowledge that is strong? Can the strong create knowledge that is weak? Can precarious humans challenge the weak knowledge promulgated by powerful people?

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These questions relate to Mulsow's frequent borrowings from the history of science, a field which has attended to both the sociology and the content of knowledge. There are a few moments when the epistemological issues at stake - and their relation to social precariousness- could be brought more up to date with the current history of science. Mulsow draws on the work of Benjamin Nelson (1911–1977) who argued that the Scientific Revolution can be defined as the replacement of medieval probabilism with truth (*On the Roads to Modernity: Conscience, Science, and Civilizations: Selected Writings* [1981]). According to Mulsow, this led to the undermining of truth through the multiplication of conflicting and "ever stronger statements of belief, truth and certainty" in early modernity (141). Current historians of science often argue the reverse, stressing increased probabilism and conjecture. Katharine Park and Lorraine Daston have pointed out how Francis Bacon and others collected "strange facts" in order to query specious claims to universal and systematic truth (*Wonders and the Order of Nature* [1998]). Mulsow draws on this notion of "strange facts" (385–86), yet does not place the fact in a probabilist epistemic landscape. As Barbara Shapiro has established, the fact was drawn from English courtroom practices and sought a pragmatic "moral certainty" rather than philosophical truth. The "culture of facts" also offers an example of how sociopolitically powerful people (such as Francis Bacon or Robert Boyle) aimed for precarious knowledge (*A Culture of Fact: England, 1550–1720* [2000]).

Rather than probabilism, Mulsow poses the notion of a "precarious truth" that resulted from strong statements of heterogeneous truths. Individuals even defended their ability to hold conflicting truths when occupying multiple personae or roles (chapter 2, "The Libertine's Two Bodies"). They navigated such knowledge heterogeneity through a "complex habitus" (194). Elegance in interpreting the habitus and strategies of his subjects is one of Mulsow's great achievements in *Knowledge Lost.* Probabilism, however, could offer a simpler alternative, and its history might offer an explanation for why knowledge may have been particularly precarious in early modernity. There are other instances (chapters 6 and 9) where pre-modern and well-studied hermeneutic approaches might be at play, such as Euhemerism and Christian Biblical criticism. The latter claimed that the Greco-Roman gods and the Hebrew Bible offered only a superficial or sordid covering of deeper, divine meaning. Through the new history of knowledge, one might offer a critical reinterpretation of these practices of appropriating and eviscerating meaning. Arguably, however, the Jenga-like construction of multiple levels of meaning was a successful strategy adopted by the knowledge bourgeoisie in order to render non-Christian people more precarious. The power of people glued together knowledge pieces that in and of themselves were conflicting and thus epistemically precarious.

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