

BOOK REVIEW

Lukas M. Verburgt (ed.), *Debating Contemporary Approaches to the History of Science*

London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024. Pp. 376. ISBN 978-1-3503-2623-1. £75.00 (hardback).

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This book discusses in depth the diverse approaches that are currently used to study the history of science and to historicize science. It introduces readers to various perspectives on the history of science by covering topics and perspectives such as global history of science, environmental history, postcolonial history, gender perspectives, integrated history and philosophy of science, computational history and multispecies history. This range covers traditional approaches and emerging ones, and, in this way, the book highlights the constantly evolving nature of the field. It features chapters written by both established and rising scholars and each chapter includes a commentary to the main text and a response to the commentary, which is intended to allow room for debate within the book. This format of the book helps capture the current state of the field while also considering its future direction. However, this built-in critique raises a question: what can I add in this review that is not already addressed in these insightful exchanges within the book? Here, I wish to focus on aspects of the book that individual exchanges on a topic within the book cannot cover and provide some critical remarks.

I want to emphasize the book's undeniable quality, demonstrating deep expertise in each chapter. However, this level of expertise can sometimes be challenging for readers. Many chapters introduce discourses, scholars and scholarly works in a manner that assumes that the reader is highly knowledgeable about the topic – as if the reader immediately understands where the argument is heading. For instance, there were sections about Kuhn's core ideas that I found difficult to comprehend, despite my familiarity with Kuhn. The same was true for the chapter on the history of knowledge – the main themes in the field were incorporated into the text, but to grasp their significance and relevance, I needed to draw heavily on my existing knowledge of the field. When the reader lacks such knowledge, the reading process becomes rather slow, and the number of discourses and scholars discussed within a chapter can be more than overwhelming; it can be frustrating.

Moreover, the arguments are often so specialized that they can be challenging to follow, raising two questions. First, who is the intended audience? The paradox is that if the chapters require such deep prior knowledge, they may only be accessible to the narrow group of experts who are already intimately familiar with the subject matter. Second, how can one form an impression of the advantages and disadvantages of an approach in the history of science if a chapter about that approach focuses on scholarly details rather than on the basic tenets of the approach?

This brings me to the three main points I wish to highlight.

First, although the book has ‘debating’ in its title, the quantity of critical arguments is somewhat uneven. At times, the arguments are clear and simply brilliant, such as Suman Seth discussing ontological relativism or Kuukkanen uncovering the philosophical underpinnings of the history of ignorance. However, in too many instances, the argumentation simply stops at the claim that some sort of methodological pluralism must be accepted and that this might even be beneficial. For example, Joanna Wharton (Chapter 3) proposes that gender historians of science should embrace ‘an undisciplined or messy plurality of approaches to questions relating to the concepts of “gender”, “sex” and “science”’ as this could lead to ‘more meaningful historical explanations’ (p. 92) compared to analyses constrained by strict disciplinary conventions. It is easy to agree, but the reader would still like to learn more about the relative merits of approaches in this flux of plurality. Moreover, the issue of plurality not only affects the overall argumentative achievements of the book but also is evident in how its arguments are structured. The chapters are filled with references to different works, scholars, institutions and even specific conferences. These references make it clear that a great deal is happening in the history of science – that there is a flourishing plurality within each sub-field – but references are not arguments. And without arguments, there cannot be debates – the debates that the reader expects to read about.

Second, there is also a plurality in the approaches that the chapters present. The book presents the multiple uses and understandings of historicized science more than it attempts to define what the history of science is. This approach is more than welcome, as defining science in the history of science is a notoriously difficult task (one that drives the field forward, in a sense). Extended definitional debates would have left less room for the more valuable analyses presented here. However, the plurality in the book is also somewhat puzzling. In what sense do these approaches belong together? Some summarizing analysis could have clarified the issue. Also, the chapters do not shed much light on the interconnections between the approaches. What to do with pluralism – the question the chapters are silent about – is something that the book itself is silent about.

Third, the book succeeds remarkably well in presenting how the history of science has historicized science. It demonstrates that the historiography of science, through its critical reflection on central categories, can serve as a model for historiography in general. The book addresses concerns about the history in the history of science. The book makes clear that science (along with knowledge and ignorance) is thoroughly historical, and shows how this historicity of science can be used to interrogate and analyse the history of many other issues and concepts. This illustrates that the field is at the forefront of historiographical innovation.

As a final note, my work as a philosopher of historiography has drawn heavily from the field of history of science. Many times, I have been told that this might be a mistake, as the history of science is *sui generis* within the study of history and may not count as ‘real historiography’. Now that this book exists, I can point out how simple-minded and even misleading such an argument is.