

**Ignorance, Nescience, Nonknowledge:  
Late Medieval and early modern coping  
with Unknowns**

**Veranstalter:** Cornel Zwierlein, Bochum / Harvard; German Historical Institute, Paris  
**Datum, Ort:** 23.04.2015–24.04.2015, Paris  
**Bericht von:** Nils Bock, Historisches Seminar, Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster

Can one act in a state of complete ignorance? Cornel Zwierlein (Bochum / Cambridge, Ma) asked this question in a double conference, at the Harvard History Department (February 19/20, 2015 – sponsored by the History Department in collaboration with the Harvard German Department) and at the German Historical Institute (GHI) in Paris (April 23/24, 2015), sponsored by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (Bochum) and the GHI. Here, only the second part of the meeting, at the GHI, will be discussed.

In his introduction, CORNEL ZWIERLEIN (Bochum / Cambridge, Ma) first discussed several fields of early modern theory production and political practice in which ‘ignorance’ was an object of reflection, a problem to cope with, or an unconscious condition of action. The sociology of ignorance, since the times of Georg Simmel, focuses mainly on decision-making processes under circumstances of partial or complete ignorance. The history of ideas deals with other facets of the problem as the history of the concept of ignorance since Marsilius or since Bacon. Zwierlein proposed to deal with ignorance as an object of historical study in broader dimensions. When analyzing historical processes, ignorance is often explained in a teleological manner as a state of development, a „not-yet“ achieved: actors were „still“ limited in their knowledge. Instead, Zwierlein argued, one should study the historical coping with unknowns in its own right, the processes of how unconscious nescience is transformed into conscious forms of ignorance, and the conjunctures of such cycles of transformation.

The first two sections dealt with ‘ignorance’ within the late medieval and early modern economy. DANIEL SMAIL (Cambridge, Ma) asked how we can historicize the uncertainties created by constantly dealing with dif-

ferent units of measurement in the commerce of many different goods between fourteenth century Marseille and Lucca. This study was based on court records containing testimonies of witnesses with precise indications of what the judge wanted to know, what they knew and what they did not (several semantically different uses of *nescire*). In this context, the estimation of value was not only a universal instrument, but it also turned out to be the preferred choice. The absence of standardized measurements led to a „mathematization of everyday life“ and to the emergence of experts of estimation: *crier-sergeants* (*nuncii*) and assessors (*extimatores*).

GIOVANNI CECCARELLI (Parma) showed the intersections of the fifteenth century insurance business with the often neglected contemporary reasoning on risk in theology (canon law) and within the developing field of mathematical calculation among *Abbaco* teachers. Florence was leading in all three fields. Ceccarelli identified risk as a medium by which actors tried to frame a realm that appeared to go beyond their comprehension and control. An analysis of the main Florentine insurance underwriters of over 1300 insurance contracts revealed individual links between the three epistemic fields, as well as a process of specialization of expert merchants particularly skilled in that activity.

MORITZ ISENMANN (Cologne) proposed a critical view of the historiographical paradigm of „Mercantilism“ and the concept of the „balance of trade“. Since the representations of the balance of trade were powerful instruments for exercising pressure on governments, unwilling, willed, or even strategic „ignorance“ about real facts could influence trade policies. Isenmann stated Jean-Baptiste Colbert’s efforts to empirically gather information about economic affairs. However, it was only with Henri François d’Aguesseau’s *Bureau de la Balance du Commerce* that those attempts were institutionalized.

France, England and the Mediterranean were the subject of Zwierlein’s presentation on imperial governance between 1660 and 1740. The hitherto unconscious, or at least less important, category of the nationality of goods, ships, men, and flags was brought to

the level of a conscious unknown by norms like the Navigation Act and the 1669 Marseille Edict. Those norms and practices of nationalization of economics, being the essential of 'Mercantilism', were conditioned by different imperial concepts. France privileged first Grotius's ideas of the sea as *res communis omnium* while England claimed a *Dominium Maris* combining a fifteenth century Venetian tradition with medieval Common Law precedents. Empires were therefore more built on ignorance, on the unstable socle of the unknown national, on the impetus to know the unknown, than on the knowns themselves.

The paper by MAGNUS RESSEL (Frankfurt am Main) challenged the current thesis that only merchant cities following the path of 'free' capitalist economy like Amsterdam developed into important information hubs. In contrast, Ressel focused on the enduringly high functionality and stability of the older form of privileged foreign merchant guild structures, such as the *Fondaco dei Tedeschi* in Venice. The privileges granted by the Serenissima allowed important information circulation concerning the selection of merchants in the Fondaco.

MARIE-LAURE LEGAY (Lille) proposed studying the coping with ignorance within the eighteenth century French fiscal bureaucracy and specific forms of financial management. She defined 'ignorance' as the incapacity to use and apply certain information or data. Under Richelieu, the culture of the state's secrets (*arcana*) was an important factor in political culture that stimulated the emergence of zones of ignorance even within the financial administration itself. She tried to identify specificities of coping with ignorance from „Colbert's system“ to the science of administration (reforms of the Paris brothers, bureaucracy) and to the new order of scientific and statistical approach to public accounting.<sup>1</sup>

WILLIAM DERINGER (New York) presented a case study of Hastings Archibald Hutcheson (1660-1740) and his calculations concerning the South Sea Company and public finance. In Hutcheson's papers, one can see how uncertainty about the data available and the appropriate calculations were simultaneously the effect and cause of political trust and

its lack. Concerning the South Sea Company, Hutcheson believed ultimately that the intrinsic value of that stock was a secret kept by the Company and used calculations for scenarios of different possible futures, thus defining the unknowns of his time. By an irony of history, Hutcheson, so critical towards the secrecy of information, was appointed to the Parliamentary „Committee of Secrecy“, to investigate the reasons of the failure.

A note by ALESSANDRO STANZIANI (Paris) concluded the first day. He proposed three transversal lines of investigation: first, the question of the external or internal factors that influenced actors' awareness of ignorance. Second was the problem of specifying the terminology of ignorance/ignoring during a given period, and third the problem that arises because of ahistorical definitions of 'the market' while one has to grasp bearing in mind the origin and slow development of value coherence. Stanziani pointed to estimation as a means of a no-market or a pre-market form of economic valuation. Stanziani proposed considering the role of rules, the distribution of information, the notions of future horizons<sup>2</sup> and futurity as well as probability calculations as fields of interaction where one had to cope with the unknown.

The last section dealt with 'ignorance' within the fields of „Travel, Geography and (Political) Communication“. ADAM KOSTO (New York) discussed medieval safe-conduct documents based on material from Catalan archives. A safe-conduct obeyed to certain forms, but the identification of a person was not achieved by features of those texts but by the communities concerned or by heralds instead of by documentation. Perhaps different from similar Arabic documents, its semantic potential lay more in the symbolic representation of its issuer (the king of Aragon) than in the description of its bearer. 'Identity' was not (or only to a small degree) the content of safe-conduct communication. In the West, it did not belong to the realm of specified unknowns regarding the descriptive characteri-

<sup>1</sup> Antoine Laurent de Lavoisier: De la richesse territoriale du royaume de France, texte et documents présentés par Jean-Claude Perrot, Paris 1988.

<sup>2</sup> Reinhart Koselleck : Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten, Frankfurt am Main 1979.

zation of persons.

LUCILE HAGUET (Rouen) presented Jean-Baptiste d'Anville (1687-1782), who was not the first using „blanks“ in maps but is usually known as their inventor because he used the empty spaces in a specifically reflected way. The explanatory essays (*Mémoires*) joint to his maps provided the reader / observer with a precise description of the limits of contemporary geographic knowledge. By doing so, d'Anville introduced a sharp distinction between knowns and hypothesis / intuitions: a typical specification of ignorance that served to promote Enlightenment Geography.

WOLFGANG BEHRINGER (Saarbrücken) described the foundation and development of the Holy Roman Empire's postal service in early modern times, concentrating on the general postmasters of the Thurn and Taxis family. The central points of innovation were the network of relay stations, public offices, fixed lines and schedules. On an epistemic level, this considerably changed the dimensions of time and space and stimulated the emergence of newspapers as archives of recent news. It was a „triumph of curiosity“, a response to an ignorance the contemporaries slowly became aware of.

DEVIN FITZGERALD (Cambridge, Ma) presented an analysis of state communication in seventeenth century China and stressed the systemic need and function of ignorance. Thus, ignorance was a product and a means of politics by which the emperor decided what was to be ignored and by whom. In this sense, the rich archival and historiographical documentary evidence of the Late Ming period points to a situation perceived by the emperor as uncontrolled information overload and challenged the ideal of 'absolute truth' held by the government. The subsequent Qing dynasty re-established a government based on the former ideals of information and ignorance control. The emperor was fashioned as the „genius“ of the Empire, the epicenter of all knowledge from any part of the world.

Returning to similar European contexts, the last two papers investigated the coping with ignorance within decision making contexts where actors had to rely on the early modern information infrastructure. FABRICE MI-

CALLEF (Paris) took the example of the political crisis in Provence at the beginning of the reign of Henry IV of France after 1589. Actors had to act under circumstances of partial ignorance about important parameters. They translated that cognitive challenge into the opposition between *sapientia* (theoretical knowledge) and *prudenza* (empirical knowledge), relying on the emerging concepts of reason of state theory. Micallef analyzed the ways in which unknowns were expressed and framed, and how parties tried to fill their information gaps in. All parties were constantly redefining the balance between theoretical and empirical knowledge in answering conditions of ignorance.

For similar problems two generations later, during the War of the Spanish Succession, ALBERT SCHIRRMESTER (Berlin / Paris) stressed the amounts of ignorance that European political actors had to cope with, created by the political system based on arcane knowledge, on secrecy, and on still highly incomplete information. The death of Charles II of Spain created the necessity for urgent action concerning the Spanish succession. The focus was on the cognitive challenge faced by the inner French circles surrounding Louis XIV. Based on the imaginary of the French King, constructed as source of knowledge, master of events and of History – similar to the Chinese emperor –, political decision-making and diplomatic negotiation had to be arranged, which to some extent was a strategy to ignore great amounts of empirical ignorance.

The conclusion of Zwierlein summarized in an efficient manner the main contributions of the different papers and recalled the problems of how to historicize 'ignorance' beyond the mere projection of current sociological terminologies back into the past. These problems included questions of periodization, of the differences between operative and epistemic, of conscious and unconscious, of willed and unwilled forms of ignorance, of emerging forms of theoretical reflections on ignorance and the contemporary evidence of ignorance and, finally, of the necessity to recognize even the constructive power of non-knowledge.

In these times of the digital revolution, unknowns and ignorance will be surely a fruit-

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ful field of research in the following years. The combination and interaction of different approaches and focuses allows us to amalgamate a view on normative organization, ideology and cultural practices related to coping with ignorance. The representation of unknowns as well as changes in the epistemologies and the functions of ignorance in society is one of the most challenging and complex problems, even far beyond the European setting largely chosen here, that historical research is only starting to address right now.

#### **Conference Overview:**

*Welcome note*

Rainer Babel (Paris)

Cornel Zwierlein (Bochum / Cambridge, Ma), Short introductory note

Chair and Comment: Wolfgang Kaiser (Paris)

*Economy*

Daniel Smail (Cambridge, Ma), Economic Measuring, Estimation and System Uncertainties in Late Medieval City Economies

Giovanni Ceccarelli (Parma), Coping with unknown risks in Renaissance Florence: Insurers, friars and abbaco teachers

Moritz Isenmann (Cologne), Non-knowledge and perception as factors for trade policy in the Seventeenth Century?

Cornel Zwierlein (Bochum / Cambridge, Ma), The unknown nation. Ignorance and Mercantilism in the Mediterranean 1660-1740

Chair: Christine Lebeau (Paris I)

Marie-Laure Legay (Lille), L'ignorance dans la culture financière de l'Etat au XVIIIe siècle

William Deringer (New York), Modelling Ignorance: Uncertainty, Secrecy, and Financial Analysis in Eighteenth-Century Britain

Magnus Ressel (Frankfurt am Main), Institutionalization as compensation of market intransparency: The Fondaco dei Tedeschi in Venice and the Levant Market

Comment on the Panels on Economy and Ignorance

Alessandro Stanziani (Paris)

*Travel, Communication, Geography*

Chair: Rainer Babel

Adam Kosto (New York), Ignorance about the traveller: Safe-Conduct in the Middle Ages

Wolfgang Behringer (Saarbrücken), Changing Dimensions of Space and Time: The Miraculous Effects of the Early Modern Communication Revolution

Devin Fitzgerald (Cambridge, Ma), The blind Emperor: long-distance communication in 17th century China

Lucile Haguët (Rouen), D'Anville and specified ignorance: an unexpected but powerful way of promoting maps and geography

Fabrice Micallef (Paris), Decision-making without knowledge. European powers and the 'affairs of Provence' (1589-1596)

Albert Schirrmeister (Berlin / Paris), Comment and Comparison with the realities around 1700

Comment: Cornel Zwierlein

*Final discussion*

Tagungsbericht *Ignorance, Nescience, Nonknowledge: Late Medieval and early modern coping with Unknowns*. 23.04.2015–24.04.2015, Paris, in: H-Soz-Kult 01.08.2015.