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Uncage the Social!

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Uncage the Social!

by Kelly Moore

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Given the range of subjects that have interested sociologists – family life, politics, cities, food, technology, religion, and work to name but a few – it is perhaps surprising that only recently have they begun to use the discipline’s analytic tools to understand social knowledge using a sociological lens. It is perhaps even more surprising given that for more than fifty years, sociologists have studied natural and physical sciences as social practices. The field of science and technology studies (STS) has done the same for more than forty, theorizing and documenting how and why scientific knowledge is created through mundane and not-so-mundane social relations. *Social Knowledge in the Making* seeks to frame a research agenda for social studies of social knowledge, in this volume that includes thirteen empirical chapters by sociologists, science and technology studies scholars, historians and an anthropologist and an introductory chapter by the editors. The editors aim to challenge traditional histories of ideas that were content to simply trace already-made ideas back to their origins using interests and macro-level sources as causes. Camic, Gross and Lamont and the volume’s contributors instead emphasize how interactions in specific *settings* produce variegated social knowledge.

The three chapter sections, on the production of social knowledge in disciplines, in knowledge evaluation sites (such as review panels), and “beyond the academy” (e.g. in governments and markets) offer analyses of how routines, rules, metaphors and logics, and technologies produce social knowledge. Topics range from the role of the seminar and review panels, to how ideas about objectivity, the market, and fairness,

to technologies such as the archive and scenario-based exercises shape knowledge about humans. Given the early stages of the field of social knowledge formation, the editor's decision to try to include chapters that capture a range of knowledge formation practices, rather than to define trajectories or tendencies in the field, makes considerable sense. And the chapters they include are indeed heterogenous in their analytic approaches and development of concepts and theory. Heterogeneity comes with a price though. Although nearly every chapter is engaging and nicely written, authors do not engage each other's work in any way – although there are some really interesting possibilities for cross-talk throughout the volume.

The volume is timely. In the past five years, historians, social studies of science scholars, and anthropologists, and cultural geographers have produced studies of how their and other fields produce knowledge about humans. Some is squarely focused on practices – especially studies of economics and geography – while other work aims to show how larger-scale phenomena, such as funding patterns and changes in professional remuneration patterns, shapes the practices and content of social knowledge. Recent work on mid-twentieth century social science and anthropology funding by foundations and the United States military for example, depicts the ways that the kinds of data collected and the configurations of human subjects were shaped by specific conceptions of nationhood, humans, and colonialism.

As I suggested earlier, on one hand, given the omnivorousness of sociology in terms of its topics, it is surprising that only recently has a sociology of social knowledge begun to develop. But on the other hand, it makes considerable sense, given American sociology's liberal, realist, and reformist roots, and that postmodernism, with its calls for reflexivity, has barely made a dent in sociological thinking. The discipline's center is still anchored by positivist models that seek to imitate idealistic habits and techniques of natural and physical sciences that are understood not to include self-critique. The editors are quite aware that the intellectual traffic does not usually self-consciously flow from social knowledge practices to the natural and physical sciences. Yet they do not emphasize one of the most important ways that social knowledge affects natural and physical sciences – often unconsciously, but certainly consequentially: via social metaphors. Darwin's theories are but the most famous of the innumerable examples that STS scholars and historians have documented.

Every chapter in the volume is compelling in some way, but some of the strongest chapters come from analysts who are not sociologists, or who are fluent in the theories and methodological approaches of science and technology studies, or who take up analyses of activities that lie in edge worlds that challenge traditional understandings of “the” “social,” such as Karin Knorr-Cetina's chapter on financial markets. It is these writers who tend not to

take for granted one of the most important questions about social knowledge: what counts as “social.” The editors define social knowledge in very broad terms:

descriptive information and analytical statements about actions, behaviors, states, and capacities of human beings and/or about the properties and processes of the aggregate or collective units – the groups, networks, markets, organizations, and so on – where these human agents are situated [...] including 1) normative statements [...] and 2) the technologies and tools of knowledge making (p. 3).

Although the editors aimed to include works that showed knowledge-in-the-making rather than already made, the editors and authors don’t take up what makes the knowledge “about humans” in the social, i.e., non-biological sense, a question that seems critically important not only for social studies of social knowledge, but especially for sociology, whose claim that “the social” is *sui generis*, and that human action is not merely biological action. These assumptions about what constitutes “the social” and “the human” are have been challenged by, among others, neuroscientists, political conservatives, Bruno Latour, scholars of sex and gender such as Anne Fausto-Sterling and sociologists who urge their peers to get on the neuro bandwagon. Moreover, in other sister disciplines, such as media studies and information sciences the “social” is being made in especially important new ways – and equally important, *unmade* and sometimes reduced to primordialisms such as neurons or individuals. It is these borderlands, touched upon by a few of the chapters, where the twenty-first century social might be investigated next.

Only a handful of the chapters deal with a particular form of social interaction: contestations and failures of large projects or projects in-the making (The outstanding “*Filing the Total Human: Anthropological Archives 1928-1963*” (Rebecca Lermov), and “*Subjects of Persuasion: Survey Research as a Solicitous Science,*” or “*The Public Relations of Polls*” (Sarah Igo). The in-the-making focus of the book showcases social knowledge that is already made in a specific sense: its subjects and methods are routinized; the job of the analyst is to observe and document these routines and activities, or to observe them making a rather quiet exit or entry on the historical scene. Some of the most compelling shifts in social knowledge making in the US in the twentieth century came as a result of contestations – and some of the authors in this book, such as Laura Stark, have written about those contests. Igo’s and Lermov’s chapters stand out for their attention to the ways that resistance to particular ways of knowing humans shapes what is and can be known, a topic that seems especially relevant, given contemporary contestations over knowing people via social media, and the organized resistance of groups such as gay people to social scientific categorizations.

Related to the question of resistance is that only a few of the chapters address one of the tantalizing and critically important problems in social knowledge making that the editors take up in the Introduction: the unruliness of human subjects and the efforts that go into shoehorning them into researchers and analysts' frameworks. Social life is not already organized for knowing – as Karin Knorr Cetina reminds us in her analysis of how data is used by financial analysts but must be made knowable and governable. Science and technology studies analysts have examined the same problem in the natural and physical sciences, i.e., “nature” is hardly compliant, in any of its forms, and so natural and physical scientists, individually and collectively, have workarounds that produce usable knowledge. At other times, unruliness results in what is variously called failed research, a dead-end, or undone science. In *Social Knowledge in the Making*, the unruliness of humans is taken up most directly by Igo, who carefully documents how survey researchers turned Americans into survey research subjects, placing a lens on a uniquely human problem: the way that trust between the researchers and human subjects emerged in mass media and other fora, and Lamont, in her excellent chapter on peer-review panels, that shows that they have to find ways to generate trust relations among participants in order to take what are often extremely heterogenous proposals and ambiguous guidelines and somehow produce ratings and rankings.

But consider that primatologists and others who work with large mammals. They have to create a relation that is something like trust. This not to suggest that the forms of trust or the means by which animal-human, human-human trust is generated are identical – that humans understand each others' languages is one key reason to see human-human trust as distinct; and unless the current efforts to allow primates to have legal standing is successful, animals cannot use legal avenues, nor do they create television shows or media campaigns. But rather, to suggest that such comparisons might illuminate what is unique, or not, about the generation of trust in activities such as survey research, field world with animals and humans, interviews, and ethnography.

Normative matters are woven throughout volume, and with good reason: social knowledge, but especially, social scientific knowledge, has been linked to normative projects grand and small for centuries, and are embedded in contemporary debates about what counts as good scholarship and high-quality data, the best and wisest courses of political and economic action, and the just and fair way to treat human subjects. In this volume, authors show, in many different ways, that the “right” way to do things may be justified post hoc by references to standards, but in-the-making, what is normative is interactionally produced, not technologically or legally given.

As a volume that sets an agenda, it makes sense that the authors decry studies that read knowledge content from large-scale conditions and interests. But this volume does not do justice to a form of analysis of knowledge formation that has been fashionable – and fecund – since the late 1990s: studying the interplay between larger-scale dynamics and the everyday, mundane means of making knowledge. What is particularly surprising about this omission is that the editors themselves have made careers out of this kind of nimble – and complex – analysis. Yet in this volume, each time the larger-scale peeks out, authors (and editors) push it away, returning to interactionism and, at times, an overreliance on description. Crude claims about interests and the direct influence of “isms” ought to be avoided; but in many of the chapters, just when an intriguing set of relations among scales is introduced, it is too frequently pushed into the background. This dynamic influence of various scales of the social could be more strongly theorized in the volume, give the extraordinarily rich material contained in the chapters.

My general remarks, however, are somewhat at odds with my experience of reading each chapter. There wasn't one that I didn't thoroughly enjoy, find thought-provoking and challenging. This book is already generating a rich set of conversations among analysts in the broad field of social- and other-forms- of knowledge making; the provocative and foundational analyses in this important book are likely to and rightfully should serve as the basis for a new field of studies of social knowledge.

Moore, *Uncage the Social!*

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Kelly Moore is Associate Professor of Sociology at Loyola University of Chicago. She's the author of *Disrupting Science: Social Movements, Scientists and the Politics of the Military* [2008], winner of the Robert K. Merton Prize, from the American Sociological Association Section on Science, Knowledge, and Technology, and the Charles Tilly Prize from the American Sociological Association Section on Collective Behavior and Social Movements. She is also co-editor of *The New Political Sociology of Science* [Wisconsin 2006], and *The Routledge Handbook of Science, Technology and Society* [Routledge 2014]. Her scholarship has appeared in sociological and cross-disciplinary journals, including the *American Journal of Sociology*, *Research in the Sociology of Organizations*, *Geoforum*, and *Theory and Society*, as well as other journals and edited volumes. She has served as Co-Director of the National Science Foundation Science, Technology and Society Program, and currently serves as a Council Member for the Society for Social Studies of Science. Her current project investigates the economic origins and temporal dimensions of the idea of "wellness."