
**Burke’s goal**

This book is an attempt to address the fragmentation that Burke perceives in the cultural and intellectual history of early modern Europe. It is a synthesis of secondary literature from diverse fields including the history of science, the history of the book and readership, the history of ideas, and the history of cartography. Burke takes the sociology of knowledge as his inspiration and seeks to create a “social history of knowledge” in early modern Europe (1450-1750) that cuts across the many fields that relate to knowledge in one way or another. The resulting book covers many of the themes that we have touched on or will touch on in our seminar, but offers juxtapositions and comparisons that place these familiar topics in unfamiliar contexts.

This is an ambitious book. “Knowledge,” as Burke admits, is not easy to define. He distinguishes knowledge from information: information is “what is relatively ‘raw’, specific and practical, while ‘knowledge’ denotes what has been ‘cooked’, processed or systematized” (11). He seeks to include in his scope anything that early modern Europeans would have considered knowledge, such as witchcraft, whether or not we would consider it so. This makes for a very large tent, and sometimes it seems that the topics covered, while all technically fitting into the category “knowledge,” do not really have that much to do with each other. This is a problem because Burke has explicitly set for himself the goal of highlighting connections between different types of knowledge in this period. I think he achieves this goal in some places, but not on a large scale.

**How the book is organized**

As a work of synthesis, this book’s organization and arrangement are more important than the details of any of the specific topics Burke covers.

In *Chapter One, “Sociologies and Histories of Knowledge: An Introduction,”* Burke traces the development of “sociology of knowledge” as a field from its beginnings in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, to a revival through Foucault, Kuhn, and Levi-Strauss. Covering some of the same ground as *What is Cultural History?*, Burke describes how knowledge has come to be seen as something that is culturally constructed. At the same time, the definition of knowledge has broadened to include additional types of “knowers” (i.e., not just intellectuals) and additional types of knowledge (e.g., practical knowledge). This broad conception of the sociology of knowledge is the inspiration for the history he aims to do, although the weight of emphasis in his book is on academic or elite knowledge.

The next two chapters are more narrowly sociological than those that follow. *Chapter Two, “Professing Knowledge: The European Clerisy,”* focuses on the people who were most self-consciously aware of being knowledge “discoverers, producers, and disseminators” (18). Borrowing a term from Samuel Coleridge and Ernest Gellner, Burke calls these the “clerisy.” He traces how this group became more conscious of itself as a distinct group during this period and reviews the increasing diversity of occupations which the clerisy undertook. This leads into *Chapter Three, “Establishing Knowledge: Institutions Old and New,”* which looks at the role played by institutions in creating, preserving, and disseminating knowledge. Much of this chapter echoes the readings we have done about the role that universities played in helping and hindering the spread of knowledge in this period.

*Chapter Four, “Locating Knowledge: Centres and Peripheries”* offers what Burke calls a “geography of knowledge.” He seeks to catalog some of the ways in which what one knew was determined by where one lived, whether in the center or on the periphery. This is a somewhat fragmented chapter, touching on imperial information networks, the distribution of libraries throughout Europe, and even guidebooks.
Chapter Five, “Classifying Knowledge: Curricula, Libraries and Encyclopedias” is intended to be an anthropology of early modern knowledge in the sense of “taking other people’s categories or classifications seriously and…investigating [the categories’] social contexts” (81). This is a very thought-provoking chapter which lives up to the ambitions that Burke has for his synthesis. He reviews several ways that early modern Europeans distinguished between types of knowledge, including public vs. private, practical vs. theoretical, legitimate vs. forbidden, and specialized vs. useful knowledge. He then describes how the classification schemes employed in encyclopedias, at universities, in libraries, and in readers’ commonplace books reflect a changing early modern taxonomy of knowledge.

Burke moves from anthropology to a “politics of knowledge” in Chapter Six, “Controlling Knowledge: Churches and States.” This is a bit of an abrupt transition, from the way that people organized knowledge conceptually, to the concrete methods and actions used by church and state to learn and then control who knew what. Burke argues (echoing his sources, I think) that churches pioneered many of the methods for using knowledge to enhance power, and these methods were gradually copied by bureaucratizing states. He touches on the history of maps, statistics, and archives as all being important instruments for bureaucracies to gather and synthesize knowledge of their realms. Interestingly, censorship comprises only a small portion of this chapter.

The next two chapters relate most directly on the topic for this week, the history of printing and the book, but they are not narrowly focused on this. Chapter Seven, “Selling Knowledge: The Market and the Press” looks at the role that books and periodicals played in commodifying knowledge. However, it also touches on the way that private enterprises such as the Dutch East India Company systematically gathered and analyzed information as a source of competitive advantage, and on the ramifications of knowledge becoming a valuable commodity for intellectual property regimes. Chapter Eight, “Acquiring Knowledge: The Reader’s Share” turns to the question of how knowledge in print form was consumed. This chapter is an interesting summary of the state of one defined field – the history of reading in early modern Europe – rather than an unorthodox juxtaposition of observations from a variety of fields. It touches on the evidence that we have for how people read, including the distinction between extensive and intensive reading. The comparison between the resources that Montaigne and Montesquieu had at their disposal as readers is particularly effective at demonstrating exactly what had changed in the course of the period covered by the book.

Chapter Nine, “Trusting and Distrusting Knowledge: A Coda” complements the Adrian Johns reading that we have for this week. While Johns focuses specifically on the challenges readers had in identifying which books to trust, Burke reviews broadly the rise of skepticism during this period and how Cartesian approaches and empiricism were both reactions to the difficulty of establishing credibility and knowing which sources to trust.

How this book might be useful to you
This book is so ambitious that most every section could be a monograph, and in fact does summarize and synthesize many monographs. (For example, the chapter on “controlling knowledge” contains one paragraph on the Inquisition!) As a result, most topics are treated quite superficially. This is particularly true of the comparative material presented from the Islamic world and the Far East.

The novel part of this book is in how the topics are strung together. As such, this book is quite useful for stimulating new questions about established lines of inquiry. I can imagine, for example, even using its variety of approaches (geography, anthropology, politics, etc.) as a kind of “checklist” when mulling over a particular aspect of cultural or intellectual history in the future. In addition, Burke’s many footnotes and extensive bibliography promise to be of great value in defining further reading.