SO318 Down-to-Earth Knowledge in the Early Modern World

Seminar Leader: Maria Avxentevskaya
Course Times: Fridays, 14:00-17.15
Credits: 8 ECTS, 4 U.S. credits
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Office Hours: By appointment only

Course Description

What do we consider practical, useful knowledge, knowledge that is of service? We might consider a variety of skills highly convenient, like knowing how to cook or how to fix a bicycle, but we still encounter hierarchies in which practical skills are less prized than intellectual capacities. Writing the history of the early modern period was previously influenced by such a hierarchy between skill and intellect. However, new approaches have shown the tight intermingling between everyday know-how and theoretical insight, and the importance of considering actors’ active involvement in practical activities. This course explores the interaction between these two realms, and across a variety of contexts, such as the hold of the merchant ships, the workshop of the instrument maker, the meeting rooms of learned societies, the kitchens of the gentry, the grotto of the courtesan’s gardens. We will focus on understanding these sites, the physical objects found and processes staged within them, and the arguably distinctive bodies of knowledge – artisanal and humanist, empirical and bookish, popular and academic, feminine and masculine – that they established. We discover illuminating links between alchemical experiments and methodical ale brewing at country houses; between bureaucratic paper-shuffling and the evocation of new fauna in marine expeditions; between the legal protocols of a witch trial, and new rules for discourse about nature at the Royal Society in London. These practices of inquiry and invention informed techniques of observation and knowledge-acquisition and inscription, and created new knowledge concerning nature. The notion of expertise itself came as a result to be reevaluated, as did hierarchies determining unimportant or illegitimate sources or criteria of knowing – in definitive, what counted as “science”. Our course will include an examination of primary source material, and visits to the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, and the library of the Max Planck Institute Berlin.

Requirements

Attendance
Attendance at ALL classes is expected. More than two absences (i.e. absences from two sessions of 90 minutes) in a semester will significantly affect the participation grade for the course. Students should consult the Student Handbook for regulations on periods of illness or leaves of absence.

Readings
Students are required to complete the essential reading for each session (see below), and are encouraged to take a look at the further reading, which should also be used as the starting point in preparing essays. There is no required textbook, but all essential reading, and many of the sources for...
further reading, will be provided via Google Drive. Students are encouraged to take advantage of Berlin’s libraries and museum collections to find other secondary literature to read, and images and objects to examine. The website of the Max-Planck Institute for the History of Science (http://www.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/en/research) also offers a wide range of illustrative materials.

**Class Presentation**
Each student will make a brief (10-15 minutes) presentation on an object or image of their choosing, and then be prepared to answer questions relating to their presentation. The presented object or picture should relate to the theme of the course, and originate from the early modern world (approx. 1450-1750). The presentation should introduce the object/image, and explain how considering it helps us understand early modern practical knowledge. Students will be given an opportunity and encouraged to discuss their choice of objects and images during the first month of the semester. Once the object or image have been selected and discussed with the instructor, a presentation slot will be allocated for each student during classes in the second half of the semester.

**Writing Assignments**
Students must write one mid-term essay, and one final essay. The list of available topics for each essay is given below.

Word count:
- Mid-term Essay: 2,000-3,000 words
- Final Essay: 3,000-4,000 words

**Essay Deadlines**
Deadline for the mid-term essay: Monday, 22nd October.
Deadline for the final essay: Monday, 10th December.

**Sample Questions the Essays May Consider**
While composing the essays, students are encouraged to bear in mind the following questions and examine them on a range of concrete examples relevant to the course material:
1. What specific features characterize early modern “down-to-earth” knowledge?
2. How did art and science interact in advancing the early modern practical knowledge?
3. How did manual and mental work come together in craft practices?
4. How did early modern writers of manuals convey information about practical skills?
5. What was happening in the early modern sites of “down-to-earth” knowledge?

**Policy on Late Submission of Papers**
Essays that are up to 24 hours late will be downgraded one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where an instructor agrees to accept a late essay, it must be submitted within four weeks of the deadline and cannot receive a grade of higher than C. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. For more information, please consult the Student Handbook.

**Grade Breakdown**
Attendance and Active Participation in Classes - 25%
Class Presentation – 25%
Mid-term essay – 25%
Final essay – 25%
Schedule
Scheduled class times are available online under the relevant course heading:
http://www.berlin.bard.edu/academics/courses/fall-2018/

Sessions 1 and 2: Introduction 7th September

Essential Reading:

Further Reading:
Primary

Secondary

Sessions 3 and 4: Learned Society 21st September

Essential Reading:

Further Reading:
Primary

Secondary


**Sessions 5 and 6: Mechanical Workshop** 28th September

**Essential Reading:***

• Wilkins, John, *Mathematical Magick, or The wonders that may be performed by mechanical geometry*. London: Printed by M.F., 1648, Book I, excerpts.

**Further Reading:***

**Primary**

• Database Machine Drawings, available: http://dmd.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/home


**Secondary**


**Sessions 7 and 8: Captain’s Cabin on a Ship** 5th October

**Essential Reading:***


**Further Reading:**

**Primary**

**Secondary**

**Sessions 9 and 10: Doctor’s Practice** 12th October

**Essential Reading:**

**Further Reading:**

**Primary**
- Online exhibition “Drug Trade: Therapy, Pharmacy and Commerce in Early Modern Europe”: http://www.mhs.ox.ac.uk/drugtrade/index.htm
- Andreas Vesalius, *De humani corporis fabrica*. Basel, 1543, available: http://www.e-rara.ch/bau_1/content/pageview/6299765

**Secondary**
- Anke Timmerman, “Doctor’s Order: An Early Modern Doctor’s Alchemical Notebooks”, *Early


Sessions 11 and 12: Gender and Knowledge in Household 19th October

Essential Reading:
- Excerpts from Gervase Markham, Cheape and Good Husbandry. A Way to Get Wealth: Containing the Sixe Principall Vocations or Callings. London, 1631.

Further Reading:
Primary
- The Recipes Project Database, available: http://recipes.hypotheses.org/about
Secondary

Sessions 13 and 14: Coins in Trade 26th October

Essential Reading:
- Samuel Pepys’ Diary. Ed. by Henry Wheatley. London: John Bell, 1893. Entry for Tuesday, 19 May, 1663, also available: http://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1663/05/19/
- Harold Cook, Assessing the Truth: Correspondence and Information at the End of the Golden Age, Primavera Pers, Leiden 2013

Further Reading:
Primary
- Samuel Pepys’ Diary. London: John Bell, 1893.
Secondary
Sessions 15 and 16: Early Modern Bureaucracy 2\textsuperscript{nd} November

Essential Reading:


Further Reading:

Primary

- H. Robinson, Printed Notice on Functions of an Office of Address. Ibid. 63/7/1A-B, available: https://www.hrionline.ac.uk/hartlib/view?docset=main&docname=63A_07_01&term0=transtext_office#highlight

Sessions 17 and 18: Down to the Mines 9\textsuperscript{th} November

Essential Reading:


Further Reading:

Primary


**Sessions 19 and 20: Cabinet of Curiosities** 16th November

**Essential Reading:**
- Online exhibition of the Kunstkammer Wien, available:

**Further Reading:**
**Primary**

**Secondary**

**Sessions 21-22-23-24: One-Day Field Trip to the Museum Complex in Dresden** 23rd (24th) November

**Essential Reading:**
**Dresden State Art Collections Online:**
- The Mathematisch-Physikalischer Salon:
- The Grünes Gewölbe:
- Dresden Rüstkammer:
- The Münzkabinett:


Further Reading:


**Sessions 25-26: Library Visit to the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science** 30th November

**Essential Reading:**


**Further Reading:**

**Secondary**


**Sessions 27-28: Revisiting the Early Modern Practical Knowledge: Final Discussion** 14th December

There is no assigned reading for this class, but students should review one or two primary sources they have encountered, which they feel are significant for understanding practical knowledge in the
early modern world. All students are encouraged to prepare questions and feedback concerning the course material, and we will also receive and discuss feedback for their final essays.