

## Knowledge from Below: Case Studies in Historical and Political Epistemology\*\*

Gerardo Ienna\* and Charles Wolfe\*

This special issue is situated at the intersection of a number of active discourses in the history and philosophy of science, including historical epistemology, the more recently emerged political epistemology, and the various versions and offspring of ‘science studies’ including STS, social epistemology, and social history of science overall. We seek in this special issue to tie together the turn towards the study of vernacular knowledge and the ambitions of historical epistemology. The studies presented here examine specific ‘forms of knowledge’, and seek to operationalize the concept of knowledge from below with theoretically informed historical case studies.

**Pietro Daniel Omodeo**’s essay on labor law and environmental management in the context of early modern Venetian fishermen opens the issue. He seeks to describe the way in which embedded, practical ichthyological knowledge was integrated into the environmental management of the Venice laguna, as an instance both of political epistemology (a study of the political context of knowledge-formation) and of knowledge from below (the official magistrature’s decisions and bylaws for managing resources, diverting waters, etc. were explicitly taken in light of these practices and local expertise).

A similar dual application of political epistemology and knowledge from below, but focusing on subcontinental mathematical traditions, is at work in **Senthil Babu**’s essay “Texts, Practice and Practitioners: Computational Cultures at Work in Early Modern South India,” focusing on accounting practices in early modern India as part of routine work of practitioners performing their caste occupations; the examination of such practices provides us with a spectrum of computational activities, which controlled and regulated the lives of people in the past.

**Ana Simões** explores the observation by four groups of scientists of the solar eclipse of 29 May 1919, which confirmed the light bending prediction by

---

G. Ienna

Department of Human Science, University of Verona & Department of History, University of Maryland

E-mail: gerardo.ienna@univr.it  
gerardo.ienna@gmail.com

C. Wolfe

Département de Philosophie, Université de Toulouse Jean-Jaurès

E-mail: ctwolfe1@gmail.com

\*\* This is the introduction to the special issue *Case Studies in Knowledge from Below: From Historical to Political Epistemology*. This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 101026146.

© 2022 Wiley-VCH GmbH

Albert Einstein, one of the three astronomical predictions put forward by general relativity theory. She demonstrates how the experience of war and pacifist commitments of the lesser-known scientists documenting the eclipse influenced their practices of recording and verifying data. In this case study as well, the author explores the historically changing political conditions which enable one to understand what becomes accepted as genuine knowledge, taking seriously the entanglement of politics and (scientific) knowledge, and showing that all (scientific) knowledge is political, because it rises asymmetries, creates power imbalances, and legitimizes some at the exclusion of others.

In his essay, **Gerardo Ienna** shows how contemporary debates within the history of science diplomacy privileged a ‘from above’ perspective while largely neglecting the study of the diplomatic contribution that self-organized social actors such as social movements (interpreted as ‘from below’ forms) may have played. The text reconstructs a specific case study, namely the double legacy of Bernalism in shaping scientific internationalism. Bernalism on the one hand fostered the emergence of organizations such as UNESCO and the World Peace Council that clearly represent forms of science diplomacy “from above.” During the same years, on the other hand, Bernalism contributed to the emergence of an association such as the World Federation of Scientific Workers that (at least initially) was characterized by greater democratic participation than the “from above” structures of other forms of science diplomacy.

**Cat Moir** borrows a method developed by postcolonial scholars to decode the presence of indigenous voices in colonial archives, in order to read for the trace of proletarian voices in the archives of Wilhelm Reich’s Sex-Pol movement. Doing so, she argues, allows us to reconstruct how views about sexuality held by working-class Austrians and Germans substantially shaped the modern discipline of sexology, particularly the theorization of sexuality’s role in producing and reproducing class oppression. Moir’s aim is to expand our general understanding of how the practice of politically radical community-based sex therapy in early twentieth-century Germany and Austria produced concrete sexological knowledge from below.

Taken together, these papers offer a framework for pursuing future work on knowledge from below, and on political epistemology more generally: neither reducing that knowledge to “history from below”, nor, conversely, neglecting the manner in which it is necessarily a set of knowledge *practices*. They move historically from the early modern and Enlightenment periods into the twentieth century, combining historical case studies and theoretical/methodological reflections on what knowledge from below might mean in specific cases, and how it could be studied. As this special issue shows, pursuing the goal of writing a history of knowledge “from below” can mean many different things, which was part of our objective. Some essays emphasize the contribution to the evolution of knowledge made by individual social agents, while others focus instead on collective actors. At the same time, some essays emphasize the role played by social categories of individuals not directly related to the scientific field in the development of science while others focus rather on the methodology of “listening” to sources from below. However, all the papers

Gerardo Ienna, Charles Wolfe

collected here are united by the common tension of using the “from below” perspective to highlight the entanglement of politics and science in various historical periods. In analyzing this knot, some essays show the direct political influence on scientific practices, others have looked rather at the effects on the evolution of knowledge from the social division of labor, still others at the ideological plane underlying certain scientific practices, and finally at the political claims of scientists themselves. We therefore see this material as a first act in a broader investigation of potentially “from-below” narratives in the fields of historical epistemology and political epistemology.