

***Knowledge Lost:***  
***A New View of Early Modern Intellectual History***

Martin Mulsow  
transl. H. C. Erik Midelfort  
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TOBIAS WINNERLING  
Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf

*Knowledge Lost* sets out to present a new view on the history of early modern knowledge, and it lives up to this bold claim. The only point to be mentioned in this respect is that this view is, strictly spoken, no longer as new as it could be. The present English volume is a very well-executed, faithful, and full translation of Mulsow's German-language monograph *Prekäres Wissen* of 2012,<sup>1</sup> but it has not been revised or updated in the process. This does not detract from the quality of either the scholarship or the book, but for the following it should be clear that a decade went by since the research under review.

The introduction states that the book, working from specific cases, 'does not pretend to offer universal claims in some abstract space' (23ff.). While this is certainly true in the sense that the book very closely details a number of specific case studies, it would be taking modesty too literally to conclude that no general theses could be inferred from those cases.

Mulsow is focusing on a series of events and texts all centred on various forms of what he terms 'precarious knowledge' (4), that is, knowledge that is endangered in its survival. This knowledge is endangered because its carriers are put in danger by it: manuscripts may get lost, printed books be banished and burned, and authors and readers marginalised, socially excluded, or prosecuted. What is at stake here is thus not any kind of knowledge, but clandestine, heterodox, critical, and radical knowledge, theories and hypotheses which ran counter to established systems of belief and authority and thus were deemed dangerous and unreliable by early modern society at large.

Mulsow attempts to uncover situations in which the precarity of knowledge has left traces that allow us to glimpse how it led to fragility, marginality, and even the loss of the knowledge in question. In line with (the early) Bruno Latour, Lorraine Daston,

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<sup>1</sup> MARTIN MULSOW, *Prekäres Wissen: Eine andere Ideengeschichte der Frühen Neuzeit* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2012).

or Steven Shapin, he endeavours to pursue a social history of knowledge, where the abstract ‘knowledge’ itself is much less in focus than the social conditions in which it is produced and communicated, as well as the individuals involved in these processes. The case studies meant to illustrate these conditions and processes are primarily drawn from Italy and the Holy Roman Empire between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries (with mentions of England, France, and the Netherlands but to a lesser extent). The individual chapters are divided into four thematically interconnected sections.

Section 1, ‘Tactics of the intellectual precariat,’ begins with the German freethinker Theodor Ludwig Lau, who, in 1719, attempted suicide after being jailed for publishing heterodox and supposedly atheistic writings (‘The Clandestine Precariat’). Lau tried to defend himself by arguing that his persona as a public speaker in the scholarly debate needed to be separated from his private persona, and that his heterodox statements did not reflect his private beliefs, albeit with only limited success. Starting with Lau, other roughly contemporary figures holding equally dangerous views, such as François La Mothe le Vayer, Hermann Samuel Reimarus, Adriaan Beverland, Giulio Cesare Vanini, and Peter Friedrich Arpe are connected, and the rhetorical and visual (3, ‘Portrait of the Freethinker as a Young Man’) strategies by which they, like Lau, tried to conceal or justify their views are analysed. These names reappear throughout the book in various constellations.

Mulsoy sees the attempt to sharply distinguish speaker roles as an indicator of the first steps towards the modern concept of the ‘public sphere’ around 1700. He further establishes that the underground world in which these clandestine thinkers operated was not a personal network of individuals, but rather a loose assemblage of texts by people who most of the time didn’t even know each other by name (109).

Section 2, ‘Trust, Mistrust, Courage: Epistemic Perceptions, Virtues, and Gestures’ tries to flesh out the social formations of the ‘knowledge bourgeoisie’ and the ‘knowledge precariat’ as the major groups within which the dynamics of knowledge transfer related to precarious knowledge took place (163ff.). Important in this respect is the observation that being a part of the knowledge precariat did not necessarily translate into socially or economically precarious conditions, although such conditions could all too easily emerge. To maintain secrecy and to establish safe modes of communication for their theories, the knowledge precariat had to rely on a number of codes and dissimulation techniques which included the use of emblems in seventeenth century Venice (and beyond) and the adoption of a conscious philosophical quietism (7, ‘Harpocratism: Gestures of Retreat’) to avoid endangering oneself. These techniques are also illustrated by tracing the origin of the famous enlightenment motto ‘sapere aude’ to Johann Georg Wachter.

Wachter, a follower of Spinoza who, precisely because of these views, could not find permanent employment, nevertheless succeeded in 1740 in drafting the design for a commemorative medal struck by the Aletophile Society of Berlin bearing the motto as a coded reference to his heterodox convictions. This medal, in turn, firmly anchored

the motto in Enlightenment discourse, paving the way for Kant's use of the phrase in 1784, thus drawing attention to the importance of precarious knowledge like Wachter's as a 'subhistory' of the Enlightenment (233).

Section 3, 'Problematic transfers,' deals with problems in information communication resulting from the—often ephemeral—materiality of the storage units of precarious knowledge, especially when they only existed in manuscript form. The most impressive case study in this section is the deduction of the outline of the early philosophy of Erhard Weigel from the 1650s, reconstructed after an overview sheet that survives only in the form of a painting by Pietro della Vecchia.

Weigel, who later became a professor at Jena and one of Leibniz's academic teachers, and who, in his later writings, championed a strictly rationalized approach to philosophy in line with Lutheran orthodoxy, emerges here as a philosopher operating with cabalistic, gnostic, and hermetic presuppositions, mixed with his later *more geometrico* approach. His later philosophy became purely geometric, stripped of everything his Lutheran university would consider heterodox, making recovery of these foundations possible only through the painting, as the manuscript sheet depicted therein has not survived. Once again, many elements that were considered dangerous and, therefore, precarious knowledge, reveal themselves as a hidden groundswell of Enlightenment ideas. This new perspective also sheds light on the problems encountered in the travel and transmission history of the objects encoding such knowledge.

Section 4, 'Communities of Fascination and the Information History of Scholarly Knowledge,' widens the focus by integrating three case studies dealing with topics that encourage a broader view of the intellectual communities involved in numismatics and orientalist subjects in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Numismatics evolved as a highly politically charged science in the seventeenth century, due to the massive investments of the French king Louis XIV. This created ample opportunities for eager scholars to profit both scientifically from the Paris collections and financially from the Crown treasury.

By following Andreas Morell and Johann Michael Wansleben in their work on behalf of the French king and the precarity their confession and independent choices put them in, Mulsow sheds light on the instrumental use that governments could make of precarious knowledge and its producers to further their own agenda. Through the example of the Hamburg scholar Johann Christoph Wolf's collection of notebooks and annotated reference works, he minutely details the working mechanism of the production of orientalist theses and books in the early eighteenth century, and how and why precarious kinds of knowledge became integrated into these processes.

There are a few minor quibbles directed at the publisher that should be mentioned. While the quality of the translation is very high, its closeness to the original sometimes seems to give the text a subtly quaint tone. However, this may be the subjective impression of a reviewer trying to purge his own English of Germanisms.

More annoyingly, although the valuable index of names and places has been retained, there is no bibliography at the end of the book. All references must be extracted directly from the footnotes. As in the original, there is no subject index. Some of the images are quite small, making it difficult to discern the features described in the text (see chapter 7, 'Harpocratism'), and all images are in black and white only.

So, what are the theses of this book? That precarious knowledge and precarious scholars undergird a lot of what is often framed as 'the Enlightenment,' that there was no heterodox underground network but many isolated scholars struggling with orthodoxy on their own, albeit in distant connection to each other; and that it pays to look for details within the larger picture. The book succeeds in demonstrating all of these points, along with the usefulness of the category of 'precarious knowledge.' It is great that this important book has finally been translated into English, hopefully ensuring broader accessibility to its theses.