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ARBEITSVORHABEN

Histories of Plants and Cultures, ca. 1840–1920

The relationship between history and the life sciences has often been the subject of debate. One of the most recent examples is the rise of archaeogenetics: how data from the analysis of ancient DNA contribute to the reconstruction of the past is controversial and has led to multiple reflections about the aims, subject matter, and methodology of historical vs. biological research. This is interesting in itself, but these debates also have a long history, which has not yet been written, and to which I want to contribute with my project at the Wissenschaftskolleg.

Specifically, I will look at similar controversies between European nineteenth-century scholars, with archaeology, history, and oriental studies on one side, and botany, zoology, and chemistry on the other. One of the particularly contested questions in this context was how the history of culture and civilizations ought to be written. Botanists claimed a special role in this field, as the beginning of human culture presumably was linked to the beginning of agriculture, i.e., the cultivation of crops. Botanists argued that their expertise was indispensable for this history, because only they were able to examine the relevant sources: namely plants or plant remains. My project observes in selected examples how this agenda of a history of cultivated plants unfolded and how the humanities reacted. It thus sheds light on a little-known area of overlap between the so-called “two cultures” that gave rise to lively (and often constructive) debate between natural scientists and humanists about their different methodologies, conventions, and expertise, well beyond the worn-out dichotomy of “understanding” vs. “explaining.”

Recommended Reading

Munns, David P. D., and Kärin Nickelsen. *Far beyond the Moon: A History of Life Support Systems in the Space Age*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2021.

Kraemer, Fabian, Kärin Nickelsen, and Dana von Suffrin. “Botany and the Science of History: Nature, Culture, and the Origins of Civilization, circa 1850–1900.” *Isis* 113, no. 1 (2022): 45–62.

Nickelsen, Kärin. “Controlling Nature in the Lab and Beyond: Methodological Predicaments in Nineteenth-Century Botany.” In *Elusive Phenomena, Unwieldy Things: Historical Perspectives on Experimental Control*, edited by Jutta Schickore and William R. Newman, 179–208. Cham: Springer, 2024.