



Seminar

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Dreams of a Rule without Exceptions: A Chapter from the History of Rules

Tuesday, 8 October, 2019, 2:15 p.m.

In the Thunberg Lecture Hall
SCAS, Linneanum, Thunbergsvägen 2, Uppsala
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ABOUT LORRAINE DASTON

Lorraine Daston received a Ph.D. in History of Science from Harvard University in 1979 after studies at Harvard and the University of Cambridge. Before becoming one of the three founding directors of the Max-Planck-Institut für Wissenschaftsgeschichte in 1995, she taught at Harvard, Princeton, and Brandeis Universities, as well as at the Universität Göttingen and the University of Chicago.

Her work is devoted to the history of rationality, especially but not exclusively scientific rationality, as pursued through a study of the long-term development of categories of thought such as probability and evidence, epistemic ideals such as precision and objectivity, and practices such as observation and image-making. Her publications include *Classical Probability in the Enlightenment* (1988), presented with the Pfizer Award of the History of Science Society; *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (with Katharine Park, 1998), also winner of the Pfizer Award; *Wunder, Beweise und Tatsachen* (2001); *Objectivity* (with Peter Galison, 2007); *How Reason Almost Lost Its Mind: The Strange Career of Cold War Rationality* (with Paul Erickson et al, 2014), and *Against Nature* (2019).

While at SCAS she will be completing her book *Rules: A Short History of What We Live By* (Princeton University Press). Drawing upon sources as diverse as mathematical tables, the rules of monastic orders, cookbooks, military strategy, sumptuary codes, rules of games, bureaucratic ordinances, and precepts of the arts and crafts from Greco-Roman antiquity until the twentieth century, the book traces the evolution of the rule-as-model to the rule-as-algorithm.

ABSTRACT

There is no known human culture without rules, but the content of specific rules differs notoriously among cultures in different times and places. Yet however different in content, all of these cultural prescriptions and prohibitions are immediately recognizable as rules, whether they are implicitly or explicitly formulated. My question is a different one: can the idea of what a rule *is*, regardless of its content, change? Can rules as a category of thinking and acting have a history? I shall argue that at least in some parts of Europe, notably in metropolises like Amsterdam, Paris, and London, rules underwent a noteworthy change in form during the eighteenth century. Whereas most rules of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – a period that witnessed an unprecedented efflorescence of rules for everything from architecture to musical composition to warfare – were formulated using examples, appeals to experience, and even exceptions, the rules and especially the regulations of the eighteenth century became increasingly rigid in their formulation, as rigid as this marble meter standard mounted into the wall during the French Revolution. The elasticity that had been built into the articulation of earlier rules, leaving room for judgment and adjustment, disappeared. This was a major mutation in what a rule could be, and in the age of algorithms for everything, we are still living with its consequences.