
Phil Smith Symposium

SANCTIONED CURRICULAR IGNORANCE AS A CHALLENGE
TO CRITICAL EDUCATIONAL COMMUNITIES

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While there is a whole field devoted to the widely esteemed enterprise of epistemology, until fairly recently much less attention has been given to “agnotology,” the study of ignorance.¹ As Robert Proctor contends, this omission is particularly remarkable given the abundance of ignorance encountered in one’s life, the many different types that exist, and the foundational nature of ignorance to practices of knowledge production and consumption.² Until fairly recently no word existed to denote serious study of and attention to different forms of ignorance. Proctor and other epistemologists of ignorance use the concept agnotology to signify the study of the making and unmaking of ignorance, as well as the task of understanding how it has been and can be harnessed for political ends. I argue that reevaluating ignorance and positioning it as neither a simple nor innocent lack of knowledge, but as an active force of both psychic and social consequence might help people find common ground with difference and engage in critical community.

One can use philosophy to help trace all the different forms structural ignorance might take. As one approaches ignorance one must consider its varieties such as those “strategic unknowns,”³ “the non selected or non cultivated,”⁴ and those censored, erased, classified, forbidden, difficult, and dangerous forms of knowledge. In this paper I examine states’ political and policy attempts to create closed community by explicitly forbidding particular knowledges. I first theorize those major areas of ignorance I see as structural that close down community debate and communities of difference. I then examine a particular educational example, the spate of so-called “Don’t Say Gay” bills. I end with brief philosophical suggestions on how we as philosophers of education can become more discerning in our approach to ignorance(s).

¹ Robert Proctor and Londa Schiebinger, eds., *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

² *Ibid.*, 2.

³ Linsey McGoey, “Strategic Unknowns: Towards a Sociology of Ignorance,” *Economy and Society* 41, no. 1 (2012): 3.

⁴ Londa Schiebinger, “West Indian Abortifacients and the Making of Ignorance,” in Proctor and Londa Schiebinger, eds., *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

 COLONIALIST IGNORANCE

One example of the institutionalized, structural nature of ignorance stems from lost forms of knowledge or those “carefully and selectively not selected” for production.⁵ Londa Schiebinger shows how gender relations in Europe and its West Indian colonies guided European naturalists as they selected particular plants and technologies for transport back to Europe. One particular plant purposefully not selected for transport back to the motherland was the peacock flower, a highly political plant deployed throughout the eighteenth century by West Indian slave women in their struggle against slavery who used the plant to abort offspring otherwise born into bondage.⁶

Historians, she contends, rightly focus on the knowledge explosion resulting from the scientific revolution, global expansion, and the frantic transfer of trade goods and plants between Europe and its colonies. “Abortifacients,” however, represent a body of knowledge and set of techniques that did not transfer from the New World into Europe; Schiebinger details how knowledge ignored in the eighteenth century was by the nineteenth century largely forgotten, now translating as widespread structural ignorance.⁷ Had access to this knowledge been available and had there not been widespread ignorance of the existence of abortifacients, what kind of social and sexual relations and communities would have flourished? And would sexuality now be differently understood?

CONSUMERIST IGNORANCE

Offering a different account of structural ignorance, Renata Salecl argues how “passion for ignorance” operates on economic and ecological levels in contemporary, westernized societies.⁸ Amidst economic crises, people nevertheless continue to live in ignorance and act as though the economy’s troubling state is nothing more than a bad dream from which they will awake. Or, people know they are faced with huge issues of sustainability, climate change, and so on, yet act as if nothing should be done about it. She explains capitalism functions as a symptom and a discourse where the subject stops perceiving itself as a proletariat slave, re-envisioning itself as the master who directs its own life, with the ironic consequence that people actually work longer hours and begin to consume themselves. Salecl contends the ideology of choice and individualism works to foreclose organizing around common cause in the struggle for social justice. The idea that one can choose almost

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Reneta Salecl, “Passion for Ignorance” (lecture), YouTube video, posted May 17, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ae67cqJq7fA>. The title phrase derives from Jacques Lacan; see Shoshana Felman, “Psychoanalysis and Education: Teaching Terminable and Interminable,” *Yale French Studies* 63 (1982): 21–44.

everything in his or her life along with what she terms “the democratization of luxury” creates mass identification with consumer goods both for rich and poor. Those who benefit least from the system, then, do not organize or rebel against economic injustice, for they identify with the same desired objects of those who benefit from their marginalization.⁹

Both rich and poor lust after the same objects, rendering the practices that marginalize some at the expense of others invisible or irrelevant. Salecl illustrates this idea by suggesting if one cannot buy a Prada dress, one can buy a Prada wallet, or if one cannot afford a Prada wallet, one can always buy a more affordable knock-off. But, whether real or fake, the acquired good performs the same function. In identifying with what the object represents, the object can be authentic or imitation; the “sublime quality” of the object still functions. In choosing which path to take, which goods to seek, consumers express their freedom, or so the story goes. Yet what Salecl terms “the tyranny of choice” thwarts opportunity for community because while choice is said to be an individual matter, in actuality is the perception that by making “right” choices one can overcome social disadvantage; one focuses upon choice rather than on organizing to rectify the ways disadvantage is structurally produced and reproduced. She emphasizes that, as a society, we do not think about choice as social choice and we do not engage in social critique, the most important mechanism for bringing about social change. Consumerist ignorance, in other words, enables individuals to avoid questions of economic justice and to avoid opening up new spaces collectively to imagine how society could be reorganized. Personal consumer choice in the ideology of personal choice and individual freedom functions to seduce the marginalized into buying into the very economic mechanisms that produce their marginalization. Those at the bottom of the social hierarchy, so the logic goes, have simply made wrong choices.¹⁰

RACIAL IGNORANCE

The fact that whites as a group fare better than non-whites in terms of health, wealth, and access to educational opportunity as a result of institutionalized forms of racism remains, by and large, free from scrutiny. By documenting the violence inscribed in the certainties of common sense and legal and moral authority, Charles Mills reveals how ignorance becomes not only socially sanctioned but also operates as a strategy of power and domination.¹¹ His work problematizes philosophical theories of justice that hinge upon conception of the social contract usually thought to have moral and political implications rather than epistemological ones. Mills argues the social contract actually operates as a racial contract given that, historically, it only

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

applied to whites, and given how philosophical reflections on justice have glossed over the significance of this fact.

Arguing the racial contract requires a hidden epistemology, Mills suggests it prescribes an “epistemology of ignorance” that plays out in contemporary times as “a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that [w]hites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made.”¹² Mills’ theory highlights the dynamics between the psychic and the social, illustrating how ignorance functions strategically on both levels, and unmasking the significant extent to which many whites live in what he terms an “invented delusional world, a racial fantasy land,”¹³ where “misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion, and self-deception are among the most pervasive mental phenomena of the past few hundred years, a cognitive and moral economy psychically required for conquest, colonization, enslavement.”¹⁴ These phenomena are not innocent or accidental, he stresses, but prescribed by the terms of the racial contract, which “requires a certain schedule of structured blindness and opacities in order to establish and maintain the white polity.”¹⁵ Thus whites are able to think of themselves as good while in fact acting in racist ways. The misrecognition of themselves as morally innocent when it comes to matters of race is supported by structuralized ignorances whites fail to recognize. Because of white structural ignorance whites (consciously or not) largely are unable to disrupt white privilege or contribute to the creation of thriving critical communities of difference.

CURRICULAR IGNORANCE

Having defined large-scale structural ignorances I now turn to smaller but nonetheless important curricular ignorances. A curricular form of ignorance is typified by Missouri’s HB 2051, the so-called “Don’t Say Gay” bill. Recent attempts—so far failed—to pass similar bills in Tennessee, Missouri and Utah forbidding the discussion of sexuality-related subjects and explicitly prohibiting the use of the term “gay” raise new challenges to creating critical educational communities in school settings. These attempts at legislation are not the only mobilization of ignorance in schools, the decision to teach intelligent design as science is another example of curricular ignorance, but “Don’t Say Gay” bills represent a clear and blatant attempt to force close not only words but also an attempt to ignore people who are present. Current attempts to create school policies like these are a reflection of how the passion for ignorance operates on structural levels in ways that surpass more common attempts at “hidden curriculum.”

¹² Ibid., 18, emphasis added.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 19.

¹⁵ Ibid.

The text of the bill is short, but its scope and intent are wide-ranging:

Notwithstanding any other law to the contrary, no instruction, material, or extracurricular activity sponsored by a public school that discusses sexual orientation other than in scientific instruction concerning human reproduction shall be provided in any public school.¹⁶

The most obvious effect of these bills is school policy becomes framed as enforcing ignorance to prohibit students' learning and flourishing. Such bills eliminate crucial discussion of the historical and contemporary realities, struggles and contributions of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, curious, and questioning communities in schools and foster the formation of ignorant, closed communities where difference is denied and penalized. Under such legislation, teachers are prohibited from addressing bullying based on sexual difference and gender nonconformity, and in schools where teachers and students use extracurricular activities to supplement what they see as missing subjects, such laws go further than the passive ignorance of curricular absence, essentially raising the intensity of the drive to ignorance by enforcing prohibition.

Because the legal status of groups like gay/straight alliances and freedom of speech groups is firmly established, laws such as these function differently than earlier attempts to prohibit discussions of sensitive topics. They actively undo gains made to increase the range of representation in schools and, as such, represent a different kind of ignorance: one that recognizes there may be legitimate reasons to make these issues part of schools—maybe even acknowledges such reasons exist somewhere for some other school—but uses local or state values essentially to say, “not here.” Such arguments' localism represents a variation on the theme of “family values” that widens its scope to become “state values.”

Despite the fact that last year in Tennessee a “Don't Say Gay” bill passed the state senate but stalled in the house, we may see it resurface this year—new and improved—reports *The Huffington Post's* Michelangelo Signoreli.¹⁷ Senate Republicans now propose a change to Tennessee's anti-bullying law to exempt condemnation of homosexuality based on religion. The outrageous fact of this case is antigay legislation supporters claim the change is about freedom of speech, all the while rallying to censor all discussion of homosexuality in schools. The proclaimed desire here is to allow students to express their religious views about homosexuality as long as they do not make threats or engage in any violent act. Under this change acts of name-calling and accusing others of being a “dyke” or “faggot” would be considered bullying,

¹⁶ Missouri House Bill No. 2051, <http://www.house.mo.gov/billtracking/bills121/billpdf/intro/HB2051I.pdf>.

¹⁷ Michaelangelo Signoreli, “‘Don't Say Gay’—But Sodomite and Pervert Are Fine,” <http://2012.talkingpointsmemo.com/2012/05/missouri-dont-say-gay-bill.php>.

but as Signorelli points out, names like sodomite or pervert, if based upon biblical claims that homosexuality is an abomination and punishable by death, would be labeled perfectly fine. Anti-bullying laws, he reminds us, are in place to protect all students, including Christian students, from being harassed because of who they are. This example details how one form of curricular ignorance is mobilized as a self-preservation strategy within a closed, heterosexual community actively working to prevent engagement with difference. I also want to extend Mills here to show how this political move is not about the preservation of heterosexuality against homosexuality but is a way rendering invisible queerness within all relations.

CONCLUSION

I read these varieties of structural ignorance as operating on both structural and individual levels. Socially sanctioned forms of ignorance work to quash curiosity about difference and deny the multiplicity of knowledges. Popular representations of desire and sexuality fail to capture the ambiguity, the instability, and the uncertainties constitutive of the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality, much as they have failed to capture the ambiguity and instability of race and consumer relations. I conclude this paper by highlighting briefly how such ignorances work within schools. By attempting to coerce teachers and students into making a core reality of some students' lives literally unspeakable, such policies only prove why LGBT students (and teachers) need stronger protections in schools.

All is not lost, however. Ignorances are not only active forms of knowledge, they are impetuses for resistance. Student groups are organizing in response to these policy-based ignorances and finding common cause with other student groups, for example, forming dialogue groups between religious students and queer, questioning, and ally students. Student activist groups are joining forces, finding common cause, and getting more involved in creating spaces for critical engagement and the organization of their own communities.

New understandings of ignorance as structurally produced, reproduced, and avidly consumed present philosophers of education, particularly those concerned with social-justice pedagogies, with a number of quandaries. When we take seriously the ways in which ignorance is socially sanctioned in various legal, political, moral, and epistemological arenas (that are then reinforced through our educational institutions and popular culture), how can we understand complicity? Where do we locate responsible agency? Fostering engagement with critical communities of difference, I argue, is the only way really to grapple with the ways in which disavowed desires and unacknowledged fears structure forms of ignorance on psychic and sociopolitical levels, the only way to create spaces that enable the expression of curious desire, collaborative creative endeavors, and the fostering of relations of reciprocity: spaces where pleasure and possibility can be found within such ignorances.
