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Strategic unknowns: towards a sociology of ignorance

Linsey McGoey

Abstract

Developing an agenda for the social study of ignorance, this paper introduces the sociology of strategic unknowns: the investigation of the multifaceted ways that ignorance can be harnessed as a resource, enabling knowledge to be deflected, obscured, concealed or magnified in a way that increases the scope of what remains unintelligible. In contrast to theoretical preoccupations that underlie the study of knowledge accumulation, a focus on the importance of strategic unknowns resists the tendency to value knowledge over ignorance or to assume that the procurement of more knowledge is linked in an automatic or a linear fashion to the attainment of more social or political power. Refining and challenging the assumption that modern liberal societies inevitably thrive on the accumulation of information about the public personas, private psyches, consumer habits or political proclivities of citizens, the papers in the special issue explore how the cultivation of strategic unknowns remains a resource – perhaps the greatest resource – for those in a position of power and those subject to it.

Keywords: sociology of ignorance; strategic unknowns; ambiguity; risk; uncertainty.

Introduction

Three days after the 2010 earthquake struck in Haiti, levelling buildings in Port-au-Prince and killing hundreds of thousands of people, a Royal Caribbean International cruise ship docked sixty miles from the earthquake zone so passengers could 'cut loose' for the afternoon. Moored at Labadee, a port on Haiti's northern coast, passengers enjoyed water sports, a barbecue and

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shopped for Haitian handicrafts on a beach fenced in by a security gate and patrolled by armed guards. Down the coast a few dozen miles, tens of thousands of Haitians were being buried in the mass graves hastily constructed as bodies overflowed the capacity of demolished hospitals and morgues.

Some passengers refused to disembark. 'I just can't see myself sunning on the beach, playing in the water, eating a barbecue, and enjoying a cocktail while there are tens of thousands of dead people being piled up on the streets', one wrote on the cruise line's internet forum, later quoted in *The Guardian* newspaper (Booth, 2010).

Other passengers praised the decision to moor, suggesting that it would be horrendous to abandon the country at the very moment when their tourist dollars were needed most. They pointed out as well that the ship had distributed food aid upon arrival, and Royal Caribbean pledged to donate proceeds from the beach visit to relief efforts. Debates over the appropriateness of the visit flooded internet forums. One site, cruisecritic.co.uk, ran a poll asking if the ship had chosen to dock too soon after the crisis. Two-thirds of respondents, 67 per cent, felt the visit was commendable for bringing much-needed food aid and economic support (Light, 2010).

Passengers who stayed on board were berated in some online discussions for turning a blind eye, ostrich-like, to the reality of the catastrophe. Others suggested that simple proximity to an earthquake zone should not mean that those sunning themselves on the beach were any more at fault than those switching off news programmes or throwing away a newspaper in London or New York: ignoring a crisis from the safety of far-away locations is just as reprehensible as ignoring a crisis that is unfolding in one's backyard.

'Simply turning one's back on the need is morally objectionable', Thomas Scanlon, a philosopher at Harvard University, wrote to a news reporter.

> But doing so while on the beach in Haiti is no worse than doing so while on the beach in Nassau, and shifting your vacation plans from the former to the latter does no one any good. If anything, it suggests a desire not to be bothered by the distressing thought of how bad things are for the earthquake victims.
>
> (Kurczy, 2010)

At the heart of debates over responses to crises such as in Haiti is the question of whose wilful ignorance is the most defensible and whose is the most reprehensible: the passengers with their eyes wide shut on the ship, those consoling themselves for their revelry on the beach by buying extra Haitian shell necklaces or those switching off their televisions at home.

In order to analyse Royal Caribbean's response to the crisis – to interrogate an action that cloaks itself against blame by sanctifying its own motives (the ship was bringing food aid), by stressing the evils of alternative possibilities (to *not* dock would have been a worse act of abandonment) or by inculpating distant witnesses as accomplices (frolicking on a beach in France is as bad as in Haiti) – we need less attention to the politics of knowledge and more to the politics of

ignorance, to the mobilization of ambiguity, the denial of unsettling facts, the realization that knowing the *least* amount possible is often the most indispensable tool for managing risks and exonerating oneself from blame in the aftermath of catastrophic events.[1]

The effort to understand personal and institutional (in)action in the face of tragic or simply inconvenient facts demands attention to what Peter Galison has called 'antiepistemology', the study of non-knowledge or the art of how knowledge is deflected, covered and obscured (Galison, 2004, p. 237). While epistemology explores the nature, methodology and limits of the production of knowledge, antiepistemology asks after its shadow: the nature of non-knowledge, and the political and social practices embedded in the effort to suppress or to kindle endless new forms of ambiguity and ignorance.

Until fairly recently, there has been a marked absence of theoretical attention to the value and practical uses of ignorance in economic and social life. Perhaps, quite innocently, attention to ignorance has been viewed as too obvious or banal to warrant much scrutiny. From antiquity onwards, scholars and their publics have long acknowledged the importance of non-knowledge. As Matthias Gross (2007) writes, debates over ignorance and knowledge go back at least as far as Socrates' insistence that his 'wisdom' lay in knowing what he did not know, a sentiment that is perhaps simply the oldest in a long list of familiar maxims about the advantages of ignorance: what you don't know can't hurt you; ignorance is bliss.

It is the obviousness and pervasiveness of such maxims that makes the absence of critical attention to ignorance all the more surprising, raising the possibility that the ignorance of the value of ignorance itself is less innocent than it first appears. Perhaps the stubborn refusal to interrogate the uses of non-knowledge might stem from, at best, a disciplinary instinct for self-preservation or, at worse, from a sort of self-induced myopia. This myopia could be anchored in social scientists' self-proclaimed expertise at unearthing and analysing knowledge, a vanity stemming from the fundamental epistemological premise of social science: the social world *is* knowable as long as one adopts the right methodological tools, as long as one narrows or widens one's gaze to the micro-, meso- or macro-levels, as long as one is prepared to adopt, following Geertz (1973), a 'thicker' interpretation of the myriad social cues and unspeakable languages influencing any given social action.

Attention to strategic unknowns challenges such a hierarchy, calling for a subtle shift in the epistemological gaze that seeks to offer non-knowledge its full due as a social fact, not as a precursor or an impediment to more knowledge, but as a productive force in itself, as the twin and not the opposite of knowledge. This shift in epistemological focus demands more attention to what Georges Bataille describes as the 'honesty of nonknowledge' (2001, p. 201), a celebration of the truthfulness of limitless ignorance, a recognition that accruing new knowledge does not dispel ignorance, but rather compounds it, as new discoveries magnify awareness of what remains unknown. Harnessing the honesty of non-knowledge would mean embracing a

'form of ignorance that cannot simply be deferred to future knowledge' but acts, as Monica Greco writes, 'as a source of theoretical self-evidence, in its own right' (2005, p. 24).[2]

Ignorance *is* knowledge: that is the starting premise and impetus of the following collection of papers. Together, they contribute to a small but growing literature which explores how different forms of strategic ignorance (McGoey, 2007) and social unknowing (Thrift, 1985, p. 97) help both to maintain and to disrupt social and political orders, allowing both governors and the governed to deny awareness of things it is not in their interest to acknowledge (Balmer, forthcoming; Barry, 2006; Douglas, 1986; Frickel & Vincent, 2007; Gross, 2007, 2010; Luhmann, 1998; Merton, 1987; Mirowski, 2011; Smithson, 1989; Taussig, 1999).[3]

Ignorance as emancipation

Through his work on the role of ignorance in the production of scientific facts, Michael Smithson has been one of the first to identify the practical value of ignorance, pointing out that acknowledging ignorance is a prerequisite to scientific learning and discovery; that purposeful ambiguity can be used to enhance the generalizability of scientific findings and to attain consensus about the merits of a new discovery; and that the deliberate admission of ignorance can enhance one's reputation for scientific sobriety (see Ravetz, 1993; Smithson, 1989).

Robert Proctor's work on agnotology, his term for the cultural reproduction and transmission of ignorance, examines some of the less salubrious effects of the uses of ignorance in science and commercial life that Smithson identifies, highlighting how ignorance and uncertainty are at times exploited for dubious gain by a number of industries, such as the tobacco industry's efforts to foment doubt and uncertainty about the links between smoking and cancer. A similar example can be seen in Merck's marketing of Vioxx, its bestselling painkiller removed from global markets in 2004 after the drug was shown to lead to heart attacks. In this case and other pharmaceutical controversies, uncertainty surrounding whether the drug or a person's physiology has led to an adverse drug reaction is often harnessed in court by litigators who draw on the non-knowledge of a drug's effect in order to absolve the executives who marketed a drug even when aware of grave safety concerns from liability (Michaels, 2006; Proctor, 2006; Proctor & Schiebinger, 2008).

These examples mostly highlight the negative uses of ignorance, illuminating the ways that ignorance is useful to those seeking to conceal information while appearing transparent or to absolve themselves of involvement in fraudulent or simply incompetent activities. Only a handful of studies have explored the positive uses of ignorance, the ways that ignorance helps to guard against prejudice in political and legal life or the way that deliberate ignorance

is upheld as a moral duty, such as the guiding assumption within medical ethics that ignorance of disease aetiologies and potential treatments is preferable to obtaining evidence through unethical means.

Even studies pointing to positive uses of ignorance – studies that highlight the value of ignorance in preventing prejudice in legal or medical arenas – demand more qualification and scrutiny than they have received. Proctor, for example, points rather too optimistically to John Rawls' championing of a 'veil of ignorance' in deliberations over distributive justice as an example of the virtue, even the imperative, of ignorance. 'We find something similar in the courtroom,' Proctor writes, 'where jurors are supposed to be ignorant of the particulars of the crime they are evaluating . . . knowledge here is interestingly attached to bias, ignorance to balance' (Proctor & Schiebinger, 2008, p. 24).

Rawls's concept of a veil of ignorance is a central feature of his original position, where individuals are asked to deliberate without knowledge of how they themselves would fare in the outcome of a decision. A good example is the case of nineteenth-century white US southerners who condoned slavery, but would probably have shifted their views had they not known whether, in a refashioning of society, they would be enslaved or not.[4] Attractive as the concept may be in theory, it is rare that an individual or a political entity such as a state has the opportunity or the incentive to apply it to their own decision-making processes, highlighting the gulf that exists between the desire to ignore social or economic context, what might be considered 'aspirational ignorance', and the failure of various actors – hiring boards, jurors, judges, police officers – to do so in practice.

Justice is blind, the popular saying suggests. But of course it is not. Perhaps Eve Sedgwick's work does the best job of illustrating the mercurial nature of ignorance in legal cases and in social life more generally. As she describes, ignorance is often used to exonerate the culpable or to leverage authority in a range of different legal and cultural arenas. The strategic deployment of ignorance can be both punitive and emancipative. She offers the example of a ruling by the US Justice Department in 1986, a high period of institutionalized prejudice against AIDS patients. The ruling stated that employers could fire individuals with AIDS as long as they could claim to be ignorant of the known medical fact that AIDS did not pose a health danger in the workplace. Ignorance of the *absence* of a risk was solid grounds for dismissing staff.

The example comes from Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the closet*, her classic examination of the literary, political and personal uses, implications and contestations of a rigid bifurcation of homo/heterosexual in contemporary Western culture. Appropriately for a book that scrutinizes and interrogates the self-imposed and perennially reconstituted binary between homosexuality and heterosexuality, Sedgwick helps to challenge the strict opposition between knowledge and ignorance, to illuminate the reciprocal ways that 'ignorance and opacity collude or compete with knowledge in mobilizing the flows of energy, desire, goods, meanings, persons' (Sedgwick, 2008, p. 4).

Written in the 1980s, at a time when the AIDS crisis brought a 'sudden, encompassing devastation into the lives of gay men and their friends' (a crisis magnified by the unknowns of the disease, by the sheer ignorance of its scale and aetiology, by a sense of helplessness that rendered the crisis proportionately less comprehensible or speakable the larger it became), Sedgwick's analysis of the politics of the crisis, and, more generally, of the cultural bifurcation between homo/heterosexuals that helped to compartmentalize AIDS sufferers as distant others, is sensitive to Foucault's admonition: 'there is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to remember the different ways of not saying such things .... There is not one but many silences' (quoted in Sedgwick, 2008, p. 3).[5,6]

One of the most striking examples of the uses of ignorance stems not from the book's content, but from a foreword written by Sedgwick for a second edition published 18 years after the book was first released. The book was first published in 1990, the same year as Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, and since viewed, like Butler's work, as a seminal text within queer theory. After its release, Sedgwick soon found herself facing a personal battle over the politics of knowledge and ignorance. Namely, the insistence that she herself "come out" as either a lesbian or a heterosexual.

"Not to make a big mystery of it – and because I've written as much in other connections in the ensuing years," Sedgwick writes in the 2008 foreword. "I'm willing to say nowadays that when I've had sex with another person, it has been with a man." Why the drama, why the suspense, surrounding such a declaration in the preface to a book that challenges the cultural obsession for such declarations at all?

She provides some context. In 1985, during a women's studies class at Amherst College, when introducing a section on lesbian issues, she felt compelled, as a non-lesbian, to apologize for any limitations in understanding or conveying her interpretations of the material. A trio of students from the class turned up at her next office hour. Standing together, the women politely but kindly asked her to please refrain from doing *that* again. They explained that, however carefully she had chosen her words and however obviously her intent had been to cause less offence rather than more, her qualification of her own identity managed to indict their own. Her confession that she was not a gay woman came across like a disavowal of being one.

She adhered to their request. In ensuing years, her refusal to say whether she was heterosexual or homosexual, her refusal to encourage a 'mendacious pretence of the two terms' symmetry ... to pretend to make sense within bifurcated discourse that did not make any sense to me' became a sustained experiment in strategic ignorance. She was well aware that this experiment 'might turn out unhappily for some personal ambitions ... and was certain to put me in repeated false positions. But I increasingly saw that no truer position was available' (Sedgwick, 2008, pp. xvii–xviii). In a landscape that posited a false binary as a sort of unavoidable or escapable 'original position', the most

satisfying option was determined ambiguity, which through its performative silence, through its pedagogy of non-knowledge, sought to convey a non-verbal rebuke of classificatory systems sustained and strengthened by their own disingenuousness, by their inability to capture the realities of the identities they purport to reflect.

Sedgwick draws us into the territory of emancipative ignorance, where deliberate ambiguity becomes a weapon against the dogmatic certainties and schematic impositions of others. 'Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover who we are, but to refuse what we are', Foucault suggested once, and Sedgwick's experiment seems to respond to this hope, reclaiming authority through denying others the information they have come to expect.[7]

Ignorance as commodity

Sedgwick's allusion to the immeasurable ways of saying nothing or little at all points to a limitation of existing work on ignorance. Much of it has sought to categorize the uncategorizable, to find new typologies for defining and delineating the differences between knowledge, non-knowledge and ignorance. As Gross points out, 'at any conference where a presentation is given on ignorance or nonknowledge, the debate afterwards circles around proper definitions, new taxonomies, or lengthy new terms' (Gross, 2007, p. 743). The result, he suggests, has been panoply of new adjectives such as meta-ignorance (Smithson) or ignorance-squared (Ravetz), adjectives which imply a linear progression between forms of ignorance rather than highlight the dynamism between knowledge and ignorance.

One particularly lamentable adjective for the study of ignorance has been 'Rumsfeldian', a term that cedes rather too much theoretical ground to an off-hand comment by the former US Defense Secretary. Rumsfeld's notorious comment on unknowns did not mark the inauguration of a new understanding of non-knowledge and antiepistemology. He did, however, manage to offer an apt description for a changing *zeitgeist*.

That emergent *zeitgeist* has been a new comprehension of the economic and political value of unlimited risks and indeterminable threats for those who stand to gain from *failing* to identity solutions to problems they purport are unsolvable. Theorists working at the intersection of global security and global insurance have begun to sketch the parameters of this *zeitgeist*, challenging perceptions of risk that have dominated the social sciences over recent decades.

Richard Ericson and Aaron Doyle, for example, in an article on the global insurance industry's response to 9/11, have targeted Ulrich Beck's contention that insurers have shied from offering coverage for incalculable, catastrophic risks, suggesting instead that profiting from the incalculable has been a consistent strategy of insurers. They quote an industry executive addressing an industry conference post-9/11: 'We love ambiguity. We know how to handle uncertainty . . . risk has always two dimensions. It is a threat, it is a peril, but it

also contains the aspect of opportunity. And the art is to balance these two, threat and opportunity, in a smart and conscious way' (see Collier, 2008; Ericson & Doyle, 2004, p. 148; Gottweis, 2005; McGoey, 2009; O'Malley, 2004, 2010).[8]

At the forefront of industries profiting from 'known unknowns' are not simply global insurers, but tobacco companies thriving for decades on the refutability of evidence linking smoking to cancer, chemical companies contesting the effects of chemical exposure (Murphy, 2006), anti-environmentalists harnessing constructivist social science analyses in order to stress the uncertainty of climate science (see Latour, 2004) and securities traders who benefit from exploiting the volatility of market uncertainty and unrest (Arnoldi, 2004; Cooper, 2004).

Common to such industries is a dependence on what could be called the 'politics of conditionality', the tendency for political and economic authorities to thrive, as Davies and McGoey explore (this issue) in an analysis of the 2008 financial crisis, on their inability to predict or mitigate future risks. The financial crisis serves as the example *par excellence* of what Michael Dillon has called the 'commodification of contingency', the idea that what separates risk from uncertainty is not simply, as Frank Knight once held, that the former is measurable while the latter is not, but that, as Dillon writes, the former represents *commodified* uncertainty, it is a calculation of one's exposure to contingency. In other words, it is a calculation of one's exposure to *more* risk, a calculation that is itself contingent, as Dillon notes, on its own inability to predict all contingencies: 'paradoxical as it may sound ... risk satisfies the desire for security by upping the ante and thereby massively increasing exposure to contingency, which is further translated into new risks' (Dillon, 2008, p. 326).

Within the game of predicting risk, one often wins regardless of whether risks materialize or not. If a predicted threat fails to emerge, the identification of the threat is credited for deterring it. If a predicted threat does emerge, authorities are commended for their foresight. If an unpredicted threat appears, authorities have a right to call for more resources to combat their own earlier ignorance. 'The beauty of a futuristic vision, of course, is that it does not have to be true', writes Kaushik Sunder Rajan (2006, p. 121) in a study of the way expectations surrounding new biotechnologies help to create funding opportunities and foster faith in the technology regardless of whether expectations prove true or not. In fact, expectations are often *particularly* fruitful when they fail to materialize, for more hope and hype are needed to remedy thwarted expectations.

Attention to the resilience of risks – the way that claims of risk often feed on their own inaccuracy – helps to highlight the value of conditionality for those in political authority. A good example, as Brian Massumi writes, is the rhetoric surrounding pre-emptive strikes on Iraq, where suggestions that weapons of mass destruction *could* exist, and if so, *might* be used prompted action regardless of verifiability; the identification of a threat legitimized

activities that proceeded regardless of the threat's baseless character (Massumi, 2007, p. 9). Rumsfeld was not the first to grasp the importance of strategic unknowns as a mechanism of governance, but he might have been the first to admit it openly.

Ignorance as pedagogy

Ignorance is not simply a resource for those wielding political power. It can serve as a weapon of usurpation. Perhaps the political potential of ignorance finds one of its most explosive embodiments in the figure of Joseph Jacotot, a little-known nineteenth-century French schoolteacher immortalized by Jacques Rancière in *The ignorant schoolmaster.* The ostensible subject of the book is the story of Jacotot himself, a lecturer in French literature at the University of Louvain who stumbled over a surprising find. Faced with a situation where he is asked to communicate with Flemish students, and realizing they speak no French, Jacotot has a bilingual text delivered to the students and asks them to learn the French text through the help of the translation. He is astonished by the outcome. After only a short period studying the translation, the students developed an almost immediate command of the foreign language. Asked to write a composition in French, the Flemish students manage about as well as their French equivalents might have, with none of the barbarisms or errors Jacotot expected.

Through this modest experiment, Jacotot realized a sobering truth: the job of teachers, to *explicate*, to teach, to impart their knowledge, constantly cementing, through the guise of seeking to eradicate it, the gap between a master's knowledge and a student's ignorance – was more dispensable and extraneous than he had thought. He had taught the students nothing, and yet they had learned, leading to overwhelming questions: 'Were the schoolmaster's explications therefore superfluous? Or, if they weren't, to whom and for what were they useful?' (Rancière, 1991, p. 4). 'The revelation that came to Joseph Jacotot', Rancière writes, was that 'explication is not necessary to remedy an incapacity to understand. On the contrary, that very incapacity provides the structuring fiction of the explicative conception of the world. It is the explicator who needs the incapable and not the other way around' (Rancière, 1991, p. 6).

Through the tropes of ignorance and knowledge, of schoolmaster and student, Rancière's underlying narrative emerges. As Kristin Ross has pointed out, his analysis is not a 'suicidal pedagogical know-how' guide or a lesson in emancipation decrying the futility of modern educational systems. Nor, Rancière reassures us, is it an attempt to 'make of the ignorant one the fount of an innate science, and especially not of a science of the people as opposed to that of the scholar' (1991, p. 31). The story is best seen as 'an essay, or perhaps a fable or parable, than enacts an extraordinary philosophical meditation on equality' (Ross, 1991, p. ix; see also Power, 2010).

Rancière chose to resuscitate the figure of Joseph Jacotot, he writes later in an afterword to *The philosopher and his poor* (2004), 'not on the account of the curiosities in the history of pedagogy but because of the radical manner in which Jacotot formulated the egalitarian idea'. Jacotot's alarming proposition, that everyone could learn on their own, without a master, and that, conversely, the ignorant could teach things to others of which they themselves were ignorant, was contingent on a fundamental supposition: all individuals were equally intelligent. To pose equality in this quite naïve way, as a practice rather than a goal, stubbornly resisting evidence of the many ways individuals are not equally intelligent, was to remove inequality from the hands of those – schoolteachers, governmental authorities, philosophers – who thrive on the identification and eradication of inequalities, who thrive on the authority to 'speak for' the poor or the illiterate, and who therefore require such inequalities to persist.

Through a presumption of inequality, even by those who profess to battle or narrow it, the gulf between equality and inequality is perpetually reinforced, ceaselessly empowering 'explicators' with the task of raising the unequal or the uneducated to a forever elusive and unreachable level. Presumptions of inequality erect a fundamental difference between those with the authority to pronounce on equality and those without such authority, perpetually separating, as Ross writes, a future reconciliation from a present inequality, 'a distance discursively invented and reinvented so that it may never be abolished. The poor stay in their place' (Ross, 1991, p. xix). In Rancière's words, 'to pose equality as a goal is to hand it over to the pedagogues of progress, who widen endlessly the distance they promise that they will abolish' (Rancière, 2004, p. 223).

To insist, on the other hand, as Jacotot does, that equality is present even in situations where appearances suggest otherwise places a different duty on a community's pedagogues. Presumptions of equality demand a different form of reciprocity between scholars and students, between authorities and their publics. They demand not outrage over the persistence of inequality, but constant, endless verifications of equality itself, as a practice rather than a reward or goal. Neither master nor student has the ability to pronounce the other more or less equal, more or less ignorant, if only because ignorance, unlike knowledge, is resistant both to mastery and to monopolization, if only because 'there is no hierarchy in ignorance' (Rancière, 1991, p. 32).

To harness the levelling power of ignorance is not to suggest that social, political, economic inequalities do not persist when of course they do. It is to resist the ways that the sheer pronouncement of inequalities tends simultaneously to legitimate and perpetuate them. In a similar fashion, by pronouncing ignorance and knowledge equal tools of governance and usurpation, the papers in this special issue help develop a sociology of non-knowledge which does not, by necessity, keep ignorance in its currently devalued place.

Exploring ignorance and ambiguity in practice

'I don't think', Bataille once suggested, 'it is possible to talk seriously of nonknowledge independent of its effects' (2001). Papers in this issue echo and respond to this assertion. Ranging from the uses of 'uncomfortable knowledge' (Rayner, this issue) in environmental policy-making to the methodological challenges of studying the production of ignorance (Rappert, this issue), the empirical focus of the papers is diverse, but their central preoccupation is the same: to explore the generative, productive effects of 'negative knowledges', such as ignorance, non-knowledge, uncertainty and ambiguity, and their uses in practice.

Brian Rappert's paper has a dual focus. First, he explores the usefulness of ignorance to UK government officials facing public censure and outrage over the high rates of civilian and military deaths during the Iraq war. A key strategy for officials has been to stress the unreliability of grasping the exact number of civilian and non-civilian deaths; ambiguity has proven to be an asset rather than a liability for officials seeking to justify the war and to limit responsibility for escalating death tolls. By stressing the difficulty of discerning how many deaths had taken place, officials shifted the emphasis from the morality of the object under scrutiny – the high number of Iraqi and British dead – to a more technical question of the right methods for estimating casualties, deferring public scrutiny by propagating the uncertainty of available numbers.

Second, Rappert explores the difficulty of knowing whether UK officials were *deliberately* harnessing ambiguity over death tolls or whether they were genuinely baffled and frustrated themselves over the inaccuracy of their own methodologies. Social scientists, in writing about ignorance, must better acknowledge their own inevitable ignorance of the unarticulated or simply unconscious rationales of the individuals they suggest may be deliberately harnessing ignorance.

Jacqueline Best's paper explores how policy-makers at the World Bank and IMF have sought alternately to dispel and to magnify ambiguity when implementing new policies or defending the performance of established ones. Through fostering 'future flexibility in interpretation', ambiguity is often used strategically by those in the best position to take advantage of the fluidity of possible interpretations of their own decisions. Yet the very ambiguity of the guidelines makes it difficult for any one institutional actor to maintain their strategic advantage over the longer term.

The multifaceted nature of ambiguity – the ways that ambiguity over interpretations can be both an advantage and a liability – is also evident in Carol Heimer's paper. Heimer draws on fieldwork at HIV/AIDS clinics in the US, Uganda, South Africa and Thailand in order to examine the ways that organizations both intentionally magnify and conceal their own ignorance by carefully disseminating *more* information about the outcomes of the actions. Relating her study to work in management and social theory on ceremonial forms of compliance, Heimer explores the ways that ignorance is mobilized by

researchers faced with the task of having to communicate risks in order to obtain informed consent, while at the same time seeking to deflate the magnitude of the risks they are forced to convey. In order to fulfil research needs and enrol more patients in clinical trials, trial investigators must create *more* ambiguity about how dangerous risks actually are in practice, something that conflicts with the often elusive and impractical goal of trying to clarify risks on informed consent forms.

The social usefulness of ignorance – the ways that deliberate ignorance is an unavoidable tactic for organizations and individuals whose self-survival is contingent on maintaining a selective understanding of their own efficiencies and liabilities – is the focus of Steve Rayner's paper, which draws on work by Mary Douglas and E. E. Evans-Pritchard in order to explore the value of 'uncomfortable knowledge' in national and international science and environmental policy-making. One of the paper's aims is to dispel the idea that organizational pressure to exclude or deny information is an aberration of correct operating procedures. Rayner argues that institutional forgetfulness is both indispensable and inevitable, an inherent fixture of 'a broader set of informational and perceptual filters that enable individuals and collectives to make sense of what would otherwise be an overwhelming onslaught of sensory stimuli', a point that echoes Douglas's work on 'structural amnesia' and the ways that 'institutions create shadow places in which nothing can be seen and no questions asked' (1986, p. 76).

Douglas's work on structural amnesia is somewhat depressingly prescient of the value of ignorance to the scores of financial actors who had something to gain from purporting they had nothing to do with the onset of the 2007–8 financial crisis. As William Davies and Linsey McGoey describe, the crisis has been consistently framed as a problem stemming from the 'limits of knowledge': the limits of individual actors to discern the motives of other actors and the limits of much-relied upon models to tame or predict the future itself.

By treating the crisis as an exemplar of the *limits* of knowledge, many commentators perpetuate the dubious notion that such limits are simply an aberration of routine operations; they imply that in typical functioning markets are less fallible and knowledge of their operations more exact and universally accessible. Such a focus fails to consider the very *usefulness* of ignorance to those who failed to act on early warning signs of financial catastrophe. Davies and McGoey's paper examines the double value of ignorance: the ways that social silence surrounding unsettling knowledge enabled profitable activities to endure despite concern about their implications, and the ways that earlier silences are then harnessed in order to absolve blame and avoid liability for earlier inaction.

Conclusion

In writing about the 2008 financial crisis, it is difficult to choose whether to use the past or present tense, just as the recent Haiti earthquake continues

to inflict ongoing devastation that renders it difficult, or at least somehow disingenuous, to cement the events during a set time, even as we affix convenient markers such as '2008' and '2010' to their occurrence. The contradictory nature of temporality, the ways that time itself is always open to dispute and productive contestations, mirrors the conflicted relationship between knowledge and ignorance. The fact that these phenomena intersect, that knowledge and ignorance exist on an ever-changing continuum that constantly fluctuates as the emergence of more knowledge illuminates how much we were not aware of a phenomenon or its consequences, is quite obvious.

What are less examined are the political and economic battles that hinge on the constant policing of boundaries between the known and the unknown, on the effort to maintain either a convenient fiction of one's expert knowledge of possible outcomes or a convenient fiction of the exact opposite resource: the pretence that no action is possible or advisable given the inevitability of future unknowns. Just as much political labour is spent on policing the boundaries between the past, present and future, on securing catastrophic events in time in order to avoid paying reparations for their ongoing effects, it takes political labour to maintain a pretence of a strict division between knowledge and its opposite. This special issue interrogates the strategies involved in policing questionable distinctions between ignorance and knowledge.

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Notes

1 For a longer discussion of the wilful ignorance involved in governmental or personal equivocations over one's ability to intervene in large-scale catastrophes, see Cohen (2001).

2 For a deeper examination of Bataille's work on the aesthetics and politics of non-knowledge, see Turpin (2010).

3 Particularly in science and technology studies, there has been a growth of attention to the commercial, social and political uses of ignorance. See, for example, work by Balmer (forthcoming), Ravetz (1993) and Frickel and Vincent (2007).

4 For a criticism of the shortcomings of Rawls's veil of ignorance concept, see work by John Roemer, such as Roemer (2009).

5 Sedgwick describes how ignorance of the disease's origins was magnified by a societal refusal to talk openly about it, splitting individual families and communities into battlefields as the crisis escalated into a 'war full of disowned losses without a home front, generating grievous news that no one was willing to receive' (2008, p. xv).
6 For useful parallels to Sedgwick's work, see Rosengarten's (2009) discussion of the ways that individuals with HIV filter and embody information about HIV risks and treatment options in continually idiosyncratic ways, belying easy assumptions of linearity between knowledge and action.
7 Quoted in Cruikshank (1999, p. 121).
8 See Collier (2008) for an analysis of recent challenges to Beck's work from scholars such as Ericson and O'Malley. Collier documents how a range of experts, from global insurers to military specialists have, for at least three or four decades, shied away from calculative rationalities based on archival-statistical knowledge, developing 'enactment' scenarios that break from traditional, probabilistic assessments of how collective life can be known and charted.

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