

## **Circulation of Ignorance: A Tool for Oppression or Liberation?**

**Victor Ferrao**

Rachol Seminary, Salcete, Goa

**Abstract:** Epistemology and ignorance are intimately related. We might naively construe the relationship as hostile because epistemology deals with operations of knowledge, the goal being the elimination of ignorance. It appears that epistemology and ignorance are radically opposed to each other. But a deeper scrutiny will manifest some of the complexities involving the two. Perhaps a juxtaposing of the two, as in 'epistemology of ignorance', might offer an effective semantic tool that will assist us in drawing out the nuances implied and prove to be educative and transformative.

So this article studies the complex phenomenon of ignorance, exploring its different forms, examining how it is produced and sustained. It problematizes the role that they play in knowledge production and circulation, and seeks to understand how they impact the power relations in our society. Epistemologies of ignorance certainly widen the understanding of ignorance that is often construed as a gap in knowledge or an epistemic oversight that can be remedied once it is noticed. While this kind of ignorance does exist it is not the only kind. There are also other forms of ignorance that can put on the mask of knowledge and produce domination and exploitation. Sometimes these 'unknowledges' are deliberately produced while at other times they are unconsciously generated.

The production, maintenance and circulation of ignorance in our society generates oppression and exploitation. Ignorance is not merely a tool of oppression employed by the powerful.

It is also a strategy of survival for the victims. Often the victims of oppression use it to unlearn the ways of the oppressor. This is widely known as the 'strategy of resistance'. In the context of our exploration of how a witness of Christian values can liberate society, we explore how ignorance, in multiple ways, can re-produce oppression. However, we are not merely interested in the understanding of this issue, but also in its remedy. Hence, our study is both diagnostic and therapeutic. The motivation for this study flows from our mission to bring forth the kingdom of God in our society. It is in this regard that we feel that our study of the epistemologies of ignorance can redeem our society, leading to a praxis of life deeply fuelled by the values of the kingdom.

**Keywords:** Casteism; Epistemology; Epistemology of ignorance; Liberatory epistemology; Manufactured ignorance; Ignorance.

Epistemology and ignorance are intimately related. Yet it is not easy to discern the contours of this complex relationship. We might naively construe the relationship as hostile because epistemology deals with operations of knowledge, the goal being the elimination of ignorance. It appears that epistemology and ignorance are radically opposed to each other. But a deeper scrutiny will manifest some of the complexities involving the two. Perhaps a juxtaposing of the two, as in 'epistemology of ignorance', might offer an effective semantic tool that will assist us in drawing out the nuances implied and prove to be educative and transformative.

The 'epistemologies of ignorance' study the complex phenomenon of ignorance exploring its different forms, examining how it is produced and sustained. It problematizes the role that they play in knowledge production and circulation, and seeks to understand how they impact the power relations in our society. Epistemologies of ignorance certainly widen the understanding of ignorance that is often construed as a gap in knowledge or an epistemic oversight that can be remedied once it is noticed. While this kind of ignorance does exist it is not the only kind. There are also other forms of ignorance that can put on the mask of knowledge

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## 1. Survey of Ignorance Studies

Ignorance Studies have begun to make their presence felt and have been instrumental in the exposition of new insights into the relations of various forms of oppression.

### 1.1 Racial Oppression

Racial oppression has been investigated and exposed as an unjust practice by many scholars, but few have fully examined how it is linked to conceptions and productions of knowledge. Even less attention has been paid to the epistemically complex processes of the production and maintenance of ignorance and its relationship to racism. As the underside of knowledge calls for a thorough examination, this becomes imperative in the context of race and in particular of racism.

Attention to racialized ignorance is found in the work of Charles Mills. In his book, *The Racial Contract* (1997), Mills presents the epistemology of ignorance as part of a white supremacist state in which the human race is divided into full persons and sub-persons. Since both the full persons and the sub-persons do not fully understand the racist world they live in, the racist white people are to fully benefit from their racial hierarchies, ontologies and economies.<sup>1</sup> In 1983, Marilyn Frye, in her book, *The Politics of*

*Reality*, had already observed that ignorance impoverishes the oppressors. Far from being accidental, the ignorance of the racially privileged (e.g., whites) is often deliberately cultivated by acts sustained by institutional systems supporting the white people's sense of the world of the people of colour. This world itself is a product of the ostrich ignorance of the white.<sup>2</sup>

## 1.2 Manufactured Ignorance

Sensitive attention to manufactured ignorance can be found in the work of Robert Proctor (1996). Proctor examines the 'cancer wars' in the United States and exposes the political factors which had negatively influenced cancer research, deliberately creating confusion and uncertainty about the carcinogenic risk of products such as tobacco, meat and asbestos.<sup>3</sup> Influenced by the work of Proctor, Mills and Frye, Nancy Tuana (2004) studied the value of epistemology of ignorance for a better understanding of the ways in which sexism informs the science of female sexuality.<sup>4</sup> Invoking the notion of 'agnotology', i.e., the study of what is unknown, Londa Schiebinger examined the sexual politics behind the creation of ignorance of abortifacients (abortion facilitators) in Europe.<sup>5</sup> This attention to manufactured or socially engineered ignorance complements the racialized ignorance introduced by the work of Frye and Mills.

## 1.3 Re-contextualization of the Epistemologies of Ignorance

One can notice attempts to re-configure and re-contextualize ignorance studies flowing from the exposition that they are based on a lingering foundationalism. Harvey Cormier and Mariana Otrega disclose their stubborn reliance of binary systems like 'inside /outside' and 'center /margin'. In view of the same, Nancy J. Holland attempts a remediation relying on the work of Martin Heidegger.<sup>6</sup>

Heidegger thought that Truth (aletheia) is possible only against the background of what is forgotten or unknown. Thus, in his view knowledge depends in important ways on what is implicitly known but cannot be thematized, e.g., background assumptions, practical skills, cultural understandings, etc. This means we cannot know

everything at the same time and what we cannot know shapes the outline and provides the supporting framework for what we can. This shows that Heidegger believed that truth is dependent on context and largely contingent. It is also dependent on a wide range of background conditions, including language, social practices, pre-existing knowledge and current conditions of knowledge acquisition.<sup>7</sup> From this point of view all epistemologies become epistemologies of ignorance and all knowledge claims conceal as much as they reveal. This brings in a humble epistemology – it accepts an openness with regard to the possibility of error and the limits of human knowing. Thus just as a work of art reveals itself as work, so also knowledge is challenged to own its own contingent and partial status.

Building on an ontology of ignorance, Nancy Holland teaches that any given case of ignorance will have an ‘ontic’, that is, a concrete, contingent history. This history allows us to distinguish between ignorance induced by unavoidable limits (such as the absence of the telescope) and ignorance that conceals what could under power relations be revealed, e.g., belief in geo-centrism after Galileo.<sup>8</sup> Often in our times science that is grounded on speculation lingers for some time on account of the authority of the scientist or sheer institutional force of science. Thus, for instance, Einstein’s cosmic constant survived till it was finally dislodged by the empirical evidence provided by Edwin Hubble in 1929.<sup>9</sup> This shows that the reliance of knowledge practices on power relations urges the power relations to undergird the truth they produce.

## **2. Understanding the Epistemology of Ignorance**

Studies of ignorance are rare but the question of epistemology of ignorance has thrown light on our need to bridge the gap in our own ignorance of the role and importance of ignorance. Some obscurantist scholars who are anti-intellectual posit ignorance as a positive alternative and antidote to intellectual elitism. Besides this promotion of willful ignorance, there are interesting ignorance studies emanating from feminist epistemologies, social epistemologies, social studies of sciences, critical theory, subaltern studies, postcolonial studies and other forms of postmodern

perspectives that have engaged in a piercing critique of western rationalities. Thus, there are many epistemologies of ignorance. But we choose one that operates at the 'ontic' level which allows us to take the question of power seriously. This means that we are not concerned with the irremediable background conditions but with the historical, sociological, political conditions that can distort and interfere with our knowledge enterprise, and as such can be resolved.

## 2.1 Epistemic Location and the Epistemology of Ignorance

It is not that mainstream epistemology had not considered ignorance. It did see ignorance as a bad epistemic practice. What is revolutionary is the perspective on ignorance not as a feature of neglectful epistemic practice, but as a substantive epistemic practice in itself. It is substantive in the sense that it is an epistemic practice that produces a condition of knowledge. The epistemology of ignorance attempts to uncover the fact that the substantive practice of ignorance is structural.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed all epistemologies are epistemologies of ignorance. All knowledge claims conceal as much as they reveal, including the conditions of their production and the power relations that they serve. Hence, an epistemology of ignorance studies how the dominant elite depend on the condition of ignorance to produce and maintain this unequal power relation.<sup>11</sup> This had already been theorized by Michel Foucault when he exposed the power-knowledge relation. In our context we attempt to make a profound analysis of the same in the light of what can be called power and 'un-knowledge relation'. In other words, we shall strive to securitize the power and ignorance relation. Hence, we do not understand ignorance as a lack of knowledge or erroneous knowledge in the sense of seeing the world wrongly that can be remedied but as a substantive practice that differentiates the dominant group. That is, it is concerned with how we fail to know certain things that are of vital importance to us and our society.<sup>12</sup>

It is often said that the members of the dominant group within a society lack the ability to critique its oppression—the epistemic position of the dominant elite brings limitations that can debilitate self-criticism. Such an incapacitating condition inherited from the

social location can be seen as substantive practice of ignorance, that is, it produces a perceptual attentiveness that produces truncated versions of knowledge that fails to see its blind spots. This means that the social location of the dominant elite provides a sort of apriori disposition which is trapped in a deductive logic based on the premise that one has less ability to question. This suggests that the dominant elite lives in a fantasy land and remains in need of a leap of consciousness that can be triggered mainly by the victim. Hence, it is the victim that chiefly has the vantage point that can redeem the oppressive power relation.

The experiences of Gautama Buddha, Emperor Ashoka, and many others expose how the question of redemption is raised by the victim, triggering a leap of consciousness and then leading them to question their oppressive structures. Similarly the brutality of caste, sati and child marriage could not be substantively discerned from within, and had to wait for the entry of the notions of the dignity of the human person, and ideals of freedom, fraternity, and equality to raise the consciousness of our nation with the entry of Christian culture. Hence, attention to what we have called an epistemology of ignorance is urgent and can save our society from its debilitating consequences.

## **2. 2 Socially Engineered Ignorance**

Today, we are beginning to be sensitive to the fact that some of us are in fact responsible and even culpable for the production of what can be called useful ignorance that generates power equations in society. As early as 1921, Walter Lippmann had spoken of the process of the manufacture of consent through which the powerful and the privileged clandestinely carry their agenda further<sup>13</sup>. Noam Chomsky states that propaganda is to democracy what violence is to totalitarianism.<sup>14</sup> The techniques of mass deception have become subtle and have been sharply honed as information dissemination is controlled, and might is sought to be efficiently controlled to a sustained construction of obviousness that puts a mask of normalness and naturalness. The art of mass blinding is effectively mastered by the dominating minority. We might see how the Brahmin supremacist social location is socially engineered and religiously legitimized in our country.

The inability of the majority to look past the deceptive structure seemed to have drawn them into a contract where they have unknowingly become signatories. This contract gets the majority sucked into the intellectual domination games of the minority but obviously without their knowing and willingly submitting to the same. This means the majority gets doubly blinded: blinded to the obvious deception and blinded to the fact that they are blinded to the obvious deception. Thus, the ulterior motives that hide the ulterior motives of the minority remain opaque to the majority as they become partners in the social contract of their domination by the minority. This unknowledge or the lack of knowledge operates as the epistemology of ignorance. It becomes the lingua franca of the oppressed majority and converts the minority into an epistemic community whose voice is repeated without any reflection.

How are we to let the domesticated majority become aware that the counterfeit currency that is in circulation amidst them is enslaving them? How could the silent majority reject the framework of life designed for them by the minority? A response to these questions leads us to believe in the victimized majority. The majority is not merely a victim that is consumed and exhausted by systems of oppression. It has in fact the ability to resist and fight back. Instead of subjecting itself to the logic of domination, it can stand up and assert itself.

### 2.3 Circulation of Ignorance

There is another type of construction of ignorance. Some shades of epistemologies of ignorance attempt to uncover the strategies that withhold the access of the majority to certain knowledge and thus produce a condition of submission. These epistemologies of ignorance attempt to reclaim the knowledge systems that were denied legitimacy and were suppressed to invent the relation of domination.

The complexities of knowledge production are artfully engaged by the elitist minority to produce a gap in knowledge that can become a cultural lag that will work for their advantage all the time. It is in this context that the epistemologies of ignorance examine the ways in which ignorance is both constructed and sustained, and attempt to critique and transform it.



This brings our attention to the sites of knowledge production and circulation. Often it is vital to notice what is not deemed worthy of the status of knowledge and as such has no room in the familiar channels of circulation. Hence, deliberate shutting off of certain configurations of knowledge is indeed a circulation of ignorance in a given society.

Often the current interest, beliefs, and theories in circulation in a community can distract and misrepresent reality, but what grips our attention is that what is kept away from circulation becomes only a circulation of ignorance..

In our country the casteist monopoly of the Brahmins that once kept every other community away from the noble teaching profession demonstrates the circulation of ignorance. Hence, the demarcation of knowledge, the transparency of information and the opening up of opportunities to all can become effective antidotes to all forms of circulation of ignorance.

### **3. Epistemologies of Ignorance in Indian Society**

One can trace that epistemologies of ignorance have studied gender, race, and science issues quite effectively. I think it is time to study how the epistemologies of ignorance affect our country and our people.

#### **3.1 Production of Casteism**

The culture of India sets itself towards overcoming all ignorance (avidya), so that one is oriented towards the ultimate goal of life, i.e., liberation (moksha). Paradoxically, it is the same culture which is trapped in a chain of ignorance that has produced many indignities and committed several crimes that have put on the mask of ethical uprightness. Many of our citizens are chained to an attitude and behaviour of caste discrimination and are blissfully captive in thinking that it is a noble way of living a life of high moral excellence. It was only with the invasion of the ideals of the Enlightenment from the West and the encounter with Christianity that the deluded moral uprightness of the so-called high castes began to melt like ice. Unfortunately, the wounded tiger of casteism still survives and

appears to be reinforced within the social elite who seem to be aware of its moral depravity and yet choose to stoop to the filth only to maintain the politics of the status quo that guarantees their dominant social location. Fortunately, there are signs that India is undergoing collective enlightenment since caste discrimination has become criminalized by our Constitution. Yet the fangs of the caste system have entered our polity and caste is very often used for vote mobilization. The scientists of our country tried to show that caste-based division is merely a human invention as there are no 'caste genes.' This means that the so-called high castes were shown to be biologically the same as the so called low castes since no biological difference has been shown to exist. Thus the circulation of the socially engineered ignorance produces and maintains caste relations in our country.

### 3.2 Divisive Politics

The vote bank politics that reigns in our country is based on the construction and maintenance of the politics of ignorance. The mobilization of votes manifests a construction of the demon. The BJP demonizes the minorities to build its vote banks only to be demonized by the Congress in return to swell its vote share. Both depend on shades of ignorance and force a contract with the voters. Along with them, the other parties too evoke regional or casteist loyalties and suck their voters in their favour. This reveals that our people have become unreflective signatories of the contract with political parties as they keep voting for them along the divisive lines drawn by them. Thus identity politics has taken the driver's seat while issues like governance and law and order have become secondary in our country. The epistemologies of ignorance working on the canvas of our society have led the people to sign a social contract with certain divisive political tendencies and our voting patterns are indicative of this undergirding ignorance.

### 3.3 Illiteracy Divide

Although education for all has been a popular slogan, what one notices is only a rising tide of the divide of illiteracy. With the commodification of education the chances of the poor to access

education have become bleak. Corruption seems to have become a way of life and has entered the educational portals. Education has been put on sale, thus sealing off the door of the educational institutions to the poor. The epistemic goods of our society are unequally distributed and the system ends up with the social construction of illiteracy, which in turn produces misery and poverty.

Historically, Brahmanism produced its domination through its control of the production and circulation of knowledge. Today those who have the social and economic capital produce illiteracy through their control of the production and circulation of knowledge, and thereby carry further the chain of oppression through a social construction and management of ignorance.

## **4. Responding to the Epistemologies of Ignorance**

The imperative to be a witness of Christian values draws every Christian to arrest the circulation of ignorance and thus to strive to bring about the kingdom of God in our society.

### **4.1 Epistemologies of Ignorance and Epistemic Justice**

The epistemologies of ignorance demonstrate that there is distributive injustice in respect to the epistemic goods like knowledge and information in our society. Social agents who have an interest in the political and economic goods of a society are also interested in the epistemic goods. It is through the control of the epistemic goods in a society that the social elite produces and maintains its power relations.<sup>15</sup>

Like knowledge, ignorance too is socially located. Understanding its various manifestations and how it intersects with power requires that we pay attention to its permutations in different contexts. Habermas has already shown that knowledge is interest laden.<sup>16</sup> Thinking along the same lines we might understand that ignorance is also a configuration of interests. The circulation of ignorance can serve the interest of the dominating minority. Attention to this can help us to subvert and dismantle the vicious agenda of the dominating minority and restore epistemic justice.

Therefore, it is important to examine the politics of epistemic practice. Unfortunately, the mainstream ethics exhibits a kind of inattention to the nuances of our epistemic lives. Hence, we need to re-negotiate on the borders of epistemology and ethics. Some trends of postmodernism have built a theoretic space for an investigation of the ethics and politics of our epistemic practice. The attention to the epistemologies of ignorance we notice in our times is one important product of these re-negotiations. Raising questions of epistemic practices is automatically linked with contextual issues of justice and power.

## 4.2 Promoting an Epistemology of Resistance

All knowledge is political. It is a source of resistance to the politics of ignorance. The very insight into the operation of epistemologies of ignorance can become the site of resistance to the politics of ignorance and become a springboard for a plurality of responses. The epistemology of ignorance becomes a powerful location that can enable us to generate a response, subverting the logic of the domination of the minority.

The fact that we are challenged to produce epistemologies of resistance that reject the chain of oppression generated by the circulation of ignorance leads us to a transformative praxis motivated by the obligation for the other. It leads us to a praxis that will enable every victim to reject the position offered by the epistemologies of ignorance. This means that epistemologies of resistance are founded on the non-appropriative strength that they offer the victims of the epistemologies of ignorance.

## 4.3 Producing ‘Liberatory’ Epistemologies

Feminist theories have focused their energies in the production of ‘liberatory’ epistemologies. These go beyond the warrantability of knowledge claims to the uncovering of the power dimensions of knowledge practices. Power-driven knowledge practices often construct some people as ignorant or ‘not knowers’. This is effectively achieved with the employment of the logic of purity. The logic of purity allows the social elite to discredit the knowledge claims of the oppressed and render them invisible. Indeed, people engaged in

alternate epistemic practices are misconstrued as incompetent and even ignorant. Thus, 'liberatory' epistemologies critically study the dominant ways of making sense of the world as they often become strategies of propagation of oppression. Thus, 'liberatory' epistemologies do not merely resist oppression but seek its total transformation. This means that they are epistemologies of resistance with a clear aim of transformation.

Thus 'liberatory' epistemologies look at the production of knowledge that is intertwined with the daily practices of exclusion and oppression. The knowledge practices that involve the epistemic disadvantaging of some have to be shunned. The democratization of knowledge needs to be assured everywhere. It is in this context that liberatory epistemologies can become tools of the transformation of the power relations in our society.

## 5. Conclusion

The study of the epistemologies of ignorance has exposed the power of ignorance. The production, maintenance and circulation of ignorance in our society generates oppression and exploitation. The motivation for this study flows from our mission to bring forth the kingdom of God in our society. It is in this regard that we feel that our study of the epistemologies of ignorance can redeem our society, leading to a praxis of life deeply fuelled by the values of the kingdom.

## Notes

1. See Charles MILLS, *The Racial Contract* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 18.
2. See Marilyn FRYE, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (C A: Crossing Press, 1983), pp.118.
3. See Robert N. PROTECTOR, *Cancer War: How Politics Shapes What we Know About Don't Know About Cancer* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).
4. See Nancy TUANA, "Coming to Understand Orgasm and the epistemology of Ignorance" *Hypatia* Vol 19, No. 2, (2004), pp. 194-332.
5. See Londa SCHIEBINGER, "Feminist History of Colonial Science" *Hypatia*, Vol 19, No. 2, (2004), pp. 233-252.

6. See Nancy J. Holland, "If I Know I can be wrong: The Hidden Histories of Epistemologies of Ignorance", *Philosophy Today*, Vol. 54, (2010), pp. 122-223.
7. Ibid, p.123.
8. Ibid, pp. 123-124.
9. See Simon SINGH, *The Big Bang: The Most Important Scientific Discovery and Why You Need to Know About* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005)pp. 144-161.
10. See Linda Martin ALCOFF, "Epistemologies of Ignorance: Three Types" in Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, Eds., *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (Albany: State University Press, 2007), pp. 39-40.
11. See Lorraine CODE, "Taking Subjectivity into Account" in Linda ALCOFF and Elizabeth POTTER, Eds., *Feminist Epistemologies* (New York: Routledge, 1993) pp. 15-48.
12. Ibid.
13. See Walter LIPPMAN, *Public Opinion* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1922)
14. See Edward S. HERMAN and Noam CHOMSKY, *Manufacturing Consent: the Political Economy of Mass Media* (London: Vintage 1994)
15. See Miranda FRICKER, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and ethics of Knowing* (Great Clarendon Street: Oxford university Press, 2007), pp. 1-5.
16. See Jürgen HABERMAS, *Knowledge and Human Interest* (Boston; Beacon Press, 1971).