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A few years ago, I was attracted by the critical concept of a «sociology of ignorance» (which did not exist as such) when I first read a paper by a noted scholar from UQAM who wrote an article about what he could not understand when observing a given social phenomenon. To my view, it was a pure waste of time (for the reader) and energy (from the sociologist who wrote this essay). Some academics are in such a privileged position they may write about almost anything, even on the things they claim not to understand, and be praised for doing so since they are raising new questions. This phenomenon became clear to me from the day I saw this same scholar repeating with conviction the same twisted ideas in a lecture at the Learned Societies conference in Montréal. Therefore, I was very much interested to read this new book on The Anthropology of Ignorance, co-edited by three anthropologists from Great-Britain. Their book comprises eight chapters mostly based on case studies, none of which focusing specifically on the USA.
In their excellent “Introduction” (which can partly be downloaded for free on the publisher’s web site at http://www.palgrave.com/PDFs/9780230340824.pdf), ignorance is tentatively defined by Mair, Kelly, and High as «knowledge denied or denigrated, and its apparent ‘growth’ in the knowing party’s power to denigrate other knowledges and to refuse to engage in dialogue with their knowers» (2). This book’s co-editors argue that ignorance can be conceptualised in many ways: «it is not surprising that our authors here have found that many of their subjects continue cautiously, regretfully, proudly, or stubbornly to insist on their own ignorance» (2). Further on, High, Kelly and Mair admit there were ethnographic studies related to «ignorance as a purely negative phenomenon» (3) as well as to philosophical concepts such as «doubt, scepticism, error, and stupidity» (3). However, as they write, ignorance is not just the absence of awareness: «the innovation lies in seeing ignorance as an ethnographic object» (3). And this is the starting point for the eight commissioned chapters brought together in this book.

Studying the cultural production of ignorance (or “agnotology”) in ethnographic terms often implies for scholars to try to understand something like, if I may say, “how do people act when they do not know and are unaware of their ignorance?” For example in Chapter 4, David Letner takes from various thinkers (mainly historian Robert Proctor, from Stanford University) for providing another interesting reflection about ignorance: “ignorance in this view is any knowledge that we are not presently concerned with” (88), mentioning that inattention “produces ignorance” (88), but also adding that “spaces of ignorance are strategically produced and maintained by tactically stressing doubt and emphasizing the inherent uncertainty of knowledge” (88). These thoughts could be applied to various issues and debates, from climate change to the side effects of smoking (Proctor, 1995).

Surprisingly, many contributors of this book quote former US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld in his “famous” 2002 schematic presentation of the four possibilities of knowing and unknowing about the so-called weapons hidden in Iraq, into these categories: «1. Known knowns: things we know we know 2. Known unknowns: things we know we don’t know 3. Unknown unknowns: things we don’t know we don’t know 4. Unknown knowns: things we don’t know we know» (16).

The book covers a variety of topics and thematic areas. Reflecting on the future as being uncertain or “unknown by definition” (190), Chapter 8, for example, takes as its starting point a fertility clinic in California in order to understand how some unfertile women or in other cases childless women plan to found a family in their mid to late thirties. Indeed, Tiffany Romain argues that “by 2006, one out of every five American women was having her first child after the age of 35, which is eight times greater than the previous generation” (p. 192). This phenomenon is labelled as the “crisis of childlessness among single, professional, American women” (189). Some of these active women are just too busy to stop working, while other have not found yet “true love”; therefore, many opt for oocyte preservation because they are hoping to experience motherhood although they do not know when and with whom (210).

Anthropology of Ignorance: An Ethnographic Approach brings an interesting balance of theory, conceptualisation, and case studies, mainly for scholars and not for undergraduates. As a matter of fact, many future essays and books could be written thanks to the doors this book just opened. On should also mention here Sheldon Ungar’s 2008 article on ignorance as an unidentified social problem. My only two quibbles about this book would be about its length (it is rather short) and its two-page index (again, it is too short). Obviously,
everything has not been said in this rather short book, and I see many other possibilities for further serious studies and academic analysis on the social production of ignorance, especially in the fields of American Studies and Canadian Studies and with a focus on fundamental themes such as racism, prejudice, or the understanding of anti-Americanism.

References


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