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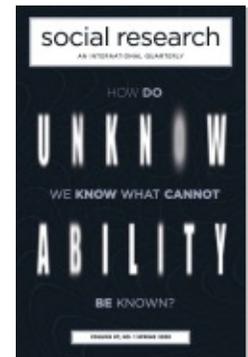
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## Micro-Ignorance and Macro-Ignorance in the Social Sciences

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# Linsey McGoey

## **Micro-Ignorance and Macro-Ignorance in the Social Sciences**

THE BEAST OF IGNORANCE HAS BEEN CLAWING AT ITS CAGE, DEMANDING more attention. For over 150 years, the social sciences have treated the problem of ignorance production as secondary to the problem of knowledge production. Ignorance has been sneered at like an uninvited guest at a high table, dismissed as an inferior, low-status cousin of knowledge. Recently, a few diners at the table have taken more notice of ignorance. As if sensing an animal sleeping by their feet, they have lifted the tablecloth and gasped. Ignorance has a pulse; ignorance breathes. Ignorance is far more dynamic and more strategic than expected. No wonder people guard their own ignorance: it strikes people as exactly the sort of dangerous animal that should be contained.

What happens when ignorance is freed? What happens when scholarly “ignorance of ignorance” is exposed and scholars begin approaching the study of ignorance differently than in the past? And how does ignorance relate to other forms of non-knowledge, including “unknowability”?

We are on the brink of discovering some answers. In recent years, the subfield of ignorance studies has become a growing area of scholarship in the social sciences (Proctor and Schiebinger 2008; Sullivan and Tuana 2007; Gross and McGoey 2015). This subfield is underpinned by the insight that different organizations and individuals often have incentives for not wanting to embrace unsettling informa-

tion, a reality that helps to showcase the differences and similarities between “unknowability” and “ignorance.”

Unknowability tends to refer to realities and processes that are not capable of being apprehended in any way—not simply by the “uninitiated” but at all. The phenomenon of “ignorance” is related to but different than unknowability in that “ignorance” of particular facts can be specific to a particular person or institution while those same facts are comprehensible to others. Perhaps because of this—the way “ignorance” implies the failure or the inability to learn rather than the inherent impossibility of knowing something—ignorance tends to carry a pejorative measure that “unknowability” doesn’t share. Another difference is that there can be multiple motivations behind ignorance—it can be willful, strategic, or feigned—in a way that differs from the state of unknowability.

Although they are distinct phenomena, ignorance and unknowability relate to each other in fruitful ways that require more scholarly attention. In this paper, I focus in particular on a specific type of ignorance, “strategic ignorance,” a term that has been defined in different and sometimes antithetical ways by scholars working in different disciplines, from psychology to sociology to economics.

Psychologists tend to see strategic ignorance as a type of individual “confirmation bias,” where individuals refute evidence that jars with earlier ideological positions. But I argue that the phenomenon doesn’t simply involve passive unwillingness to learn. I define “strategic ignorance” in a more active and collective way, as the structural ability to exploit the unknowns in an environment in order to gain more power or resources. This second definition also points to the way that studies of ignorance can help to expand sociological studies of unknowability. Rather than treating “unknowability” as an accidental or inevitable problem of lack of knowledge, strategic ignorance illuminates the way various states and processes of unknowability are often structured by the power of some social groups to remain deliberately ignorant, making some societal “unknowns” a collective achievement rather than either the unplanned absence of

knowledge or secrecy. Secrecy suggests knowledge that is concealed. But strategic ignorance, in contrast, encompasses knowledge that has been thwarted from emerging in the first place.

One of the challenges facing the effort to study the social utility of ignorance is the fact that, by definition, both unknowability and ignorance elude observation and quantification. The effort to classify or rank different forms of non-knowing is defeated by the ontological reality of ignorance itself, by the inescapable fact that ignorance is always by definition immeasurable. This reality likely won't stop scholars from *trying* to quantify levels of ignorance across individuals and nations. But the quantification of ignorance is itself ultimately impossible and unknowable, a reality that underscores the potency of ignorance, for both positive and malevolent ends. Clearly, not all ignorance is willful, but it's also apparent that it's difficult to measure whether someone's ignorance is deliberate or accidental. This second point remains underacknowledged to date. The imperviousness of ignorance to measurement is its great utility, a neglected observation that has radical implications for the social sciences and for political decision-making more broadly.

Does the fact that ignorance is not conclusively measurable mean that there cannot be a science of ignorance? No, it does not. Insights from ignorance studies have led to new insights into the sociology of knowledge and institutions (McGoey 2007 and 2019; Gross 2007; Rayner 2012), and new understandings about the limitations of mainstream, orthodox economic theories (Svetlova and van Elst 2013).

There can and needs to be a stronger science of ignorance and unknowability, a more realistic effort to chart the reciprocity between the unknown and known realms. One important step is to expand the vocabulary for describing the unknown. Another task is to explore the methodological barriers challenging the empirical study of ignorance, as well as to better understand tensions underlying divergent disciplinary approaches to the study of ignorance.

This paper takes up those tasks by developing new terminology for describing the unknown, specifically “micro-ignorance,” “macro-ignorance,” “banal ignorance,” and “rarefied ignorance.” In doing so, I seek to underscore the fact that unknowability can be both a “natural” and a political phenomenon.

## **MICRO-IGNORANCE AND MACRO-IGNORANCE**

I define micro-ignorance as daily, individual acts of ignoring. Macro-ignorance, on the other hand, is the sedimentation of individual ignorance into rigid ideological positions or policy perspectives that obscure their own mistaken assumptions from adherents, leading to new patterns of individual micro-ignorance.<sup>1</sup>

Although economists and behavioral psychologists haven’t in the past used the precise term “micro-ignorance” (it is my coinage, introduced in a recent book, McGoey 2019), there *has* been an explosion of studies recently into the phenomenon itself. A growing body of literature in microeconomics, for example, examines lab-based experiments testing the use of strategic ignorance in decisionmaking. This literature challenges earlier axioms within rational-choice theory suggesting that individuals naturally seek to maximize their interests through seeking information about the outcomes of actions (Van der Weele 2014).

Recent work on strategic ignorance in decisionmaking differs considerably from earlier psychological work on cognitive biases from scholars such as Daniel Kahneman. He and other psychologists pointed out that decisionmaking is “bounded” by people’s tendency to interpret uncertainty using different mental heuristics; rationality is socially situated. And yet an axiomatic assumption from neoclassical economic theory—that it is rational to seek more information in order to make more informed decisions—remained unchallenged in this earlier work. Later work on strategic ignorance in psychology and economics is different because it demonstrates that a strong “will to ignorance” (McGoey 2007) is more ubiquitous than was previously assumed. A closer look at this later research illustrates both the prom-

ise and the limits of recent behavioral studies of strategic ignorance in decisionmaking.

## **IGNORANCE IN ECONOMIC THOUGHT AND PRACTICE**

In general, the problem of ignorance in economics has been studied in two key, contrasting ways. First, there is the literature mentioned above: studies that explore the uses of ignorance in decisionmaking. Second, there is a growing meta-literature from heterodox economists that is asking more overarching questions about where “ignorance of ignorance” came from in the first place.

This second, overarching literature is not concerned simply with whether or not individuals seek not to know inconvenient information but also with the questions of why and how the discipline of economics in particular, and the social sciences more broadly, have, in short, gotten it wrong for many years, presuming that knowledge procurement is a rational and innate human tendency, when often it is not.

The major catalyst for the recent burst of interest in the problem of ignorance within mainstream economic theories was the 2007–2008 global financial crisis. As the economists Ekaterina Svetlova and Hank van Elst were among the first to point out, the crisis called attention to the ways that mainstream economic theory has failed to pay sufficient attention to the problem of imperfect knowledge. As Svetlova and van Elst see it, ignorance of ignorance itself is a fundamental limitation of mainstream economic theory.

Through historical explorations of the treatment of uncertainty, risk, and non-knowledge in twentieth-century economic thought, Svetlova and van Elst argue that the vast majority of major, mainstream economists since the 1950s have tended to discount the problem of ignorance of the future. They attribute this discounting in part to the influence of the economist Leonard Savage, particularly to his theory of choice under uncertainty. Savage’s problematic intervention, Svetlova and van Elst suggest, was his purposeful neglect of the Knightian problem of radical uncertainty. Savage’s theory

presupposes that even if an objective probability measure for future events is not known, it can always be assumed that economic agents behave *as if* they apply an individual subjective (prior) probability measure ... by this theoretical move, the immeasurability (and thus the knowability) issue is eliminated. (Svetlova and van Elst 2013; see also Kessler 2008)

Thanks in part to the influence of Savage, economists have increasingly neglected earlier attention to “ignorance” by economists as diverse as Frank Knight, Joan Robinson, John Maynard Keynes, and George Shackle. These economists, unlike later scholars, realized that variables constantly “change while people decide and act and, by doing so, influence the set of relevant variables; hence, the major characteristics of the decision situation ... are unknown” (Svetlova and van Elst 2013).

But for the most part, much neoclassical economic theory in recent decades has failed to account for what Svetlova and van Elst (2013) describe as “true endogeneity”—the fact that *all* probabilistic assumptions are subject to future uncertainty that “cannot be resolved, as a situation constantly changes, so that the ex-post choice should not be modeled as a mechanic, or empty (i.e., predetermined) decision.”

In a related but different vein, a number of critical, heterodox economists have suggested that ignorance, rather than being a nuisance for economists, serves as a powerful asset for mainstream economists who strategically choose to ignore or dismiss evidence that disproves longstanding, “axiomatic” economic principles.

The economist Herb Thompson makes this point in an article about how neoclassical economists have ignored or downplayed concerns over the problematic way economics is taught to undergraduates at leading universities. Challenges to supply and demand theory or the fact that real-world markets are never “perfectly competitive” are simply ignored in most undergraduate curricula. Thompson sug-

gests that many undergraduates graduate with economics degrees without ever learning counterevidence to theories presented as if they were self-evidently true. As Thompson writes, “Students and many of their preceptors do not know that they do not know that capital cannot be measured; that utility is metaphysical; that optimisation is non-falsifiable; that capitalism is inherently unstable....” (1997, 301; see also Gross and McGoey 2015; Arnsperger and Varoufakis 2005; Keen 2011).

In some ways, this reality is shifting today, a time when, as noted earlier, some behavioral economists and psychologists *are* starting to take the problem of ignorance more seriously through conducting behavioral experiments aimed at discovering when and why individuals purposely choose not to know information that is perceived to be contrary to personal interests.

The limitation, however, of psychological studies carried out under experimental conditions is that they do not help to illuminate the collective utility of strategic ignorance to mainstream economists who share the same (sometimes false) beliefs. They don’t show how strategic ignorance can be an institutional asset within the discipline of economics itself, helping the neoclassical center to stave off challenges from scholars who argue that neoclassical maxims do not reflect real-world power dynamics.

How are some groups able to exploit ignorance more effectively than others? This is one of the most important and still unanswered questions of ignorance studies. One of the reasons we don’t have robust answers to that question is a methodological narrowness in the way that the production of ignorance is being studied by different academic disciplines. Another is a set of normative assumptions that remain ingrained in the study of ignorance, and tend to ascribe ignorance production to powerful but shadowy corporate or governmental actors with an interest in producing “alternative facts” or fake news. This focus on the nefarious production of ignorance obscures attention to the power of “innocent” unknowns—unknowns that can’t necessarily be attributed to purposeful obfuscation but still have utility for different social actors (McGoey 2019).

To make this point clearer, it is useful to look closely at different disciplinary approaches to the study of ignorance.

## **DISCIPLINARY PROBLEMS WITH THE STUDY OF IGNORANCE**

In general, the social scientific study of ignorance has, to date, taken place on fairly conventional disciplinary battlegrounds.

Behavioral economists and psychologists, in one camp, have tended to study strategic ignorance at the individual level, examining the ways that individuals discount information they perceived as detrimental to their personal interests or as conflicting with earlier worldviews. Cultural sociologists and humanities scholars, on the other hand, have tended to treat the mobilization of ignorance as a collective phenomenon, something that helps different social groups maintain power in a way that reinforces itself across generations.

Sometimes the methodological effort to delineate personal ignorance, or micro-ignorance, from macro-level ignorance is made explicit by researchers themselves. Other times it is more tacit.

Take the example of a recent, important article by two psychologists, Gerd Gigerenzer and Rocio Garcia-Retamero (2017). They set up an experiment comparing two different groups of people, one in Germany and one in Spain, who were asked a series of questions related to both “negative” and “positive” events. The intention was to compare whether the respondents would want to know the result of different questions if they had the opportunity. Questions included:

Would you want to know today when your partner will die? No: 89.5%.

Assume you are newly married. Would you want to know today whether your marriage will eventually end in divorce or not? No: 86.5%.

The researchers suggest their findings indicate that most people have a strong desire to remain willfully ignorant about life events

even given the chance to “maximize” their utility through acquiring more information. Gigerenzer and García-Retamero’s specific study design was novel, but their findings square with other recent experiments from game theory and behavioral economics that reach a similar conclusion, establishing that people often prefer not to know—which, as noted above, is a different point than earlier work in psychology by Kahneman and others on “ambiguity aversion.” The earlier work suggested that people tend to prefer to resolve ambiguity. Later work suggests people often try to increase it.

And yet, this later work has a number of limits, a problem visible in Gigerenzer and Garcia-Retamero’s aforementioned study. The authors explicitly contrast their own psychological work with earlier sociological and historical works that, they suggest, examine “how external sources maintain public ignorance, even against people’s will.” In contrast, they argue, the psychological notion of deliberate ignorance examines the ways that people maintain “personal ignorance” (2017).

I argue that the effort to sharply delineate the psychological realm of ignorance from the social realm of ignorance is misguided because it makes it seem as if people’s willingness either to acquire new information or ignore information is divorced from external pressures. In reality, external forces always shape personal ignorance. Social taboos and legal prohibitions structure decisions over which truths are examined and which are not—in short, which types of knowledge become “truth” in the sense of being collectively acknowledged facts. This is especially the case when one looks at how ignorance and knowledge flow through the university system, a point that becomes clearer when one considers challenges to mainstream economic theory over the years and why those challenges have or haven’t succeeded in upending tired axiomatic principles within economics even when those principles have been shown to be incapable of reflecting actual reality.

The great promise of ignorance studies, in short, is not simply the effort to study what Gigerenzer and García-Retamero term “per-

sonal ignorance,” or everyday ignoring. A fundamental, parallel aim should be to understand why and how some individuals’ ignorance becomes unchallengeable, solidifying into “macro-ignorance” even when an entire academic paradigm might be flawed. Ignorance studies can and should help to explain why disciplinary silos and blind spots occur (c.f. Godechot 2011) and how they can be overcome.

### **STRATEGIC IGNORANCE AS A COLLECTIVE, INSTITUTIONAL ASSET**

To realize this goal, it is important not to see strategic ignorance as “merely” an individual action; rather, ignorance must be treated as an institutional achievement, motivated in part by something that I term “antistrategies,” defined as implicit, typically unspoken organizational pressures that induce individuals to act in ways contrary to explicit organizational objectives (McGoey 2007).

I first used the term “antistrategies” in a 2007 article examining the various organizational motivations and organizational errors that enabled UK pharmaceutical regulators to dismiss blatant evidence that a bestselling class of drugs was leading to negative health effects. In later work, I applied this 2007 framework to similar cases of regulatory failure: first the 2007–2008 financial collapse (Davies and McGoey 2012) and, second, the US Food and Drug Administration’s licensing of Ketek, a popular antibiotic later linked to liver failure (McGoey 2012).

Separately, pathbreaking philosophers, including Charles Mills and Alison Bailey, have used such phrases as “white ignorance” and “strategic ignorance” to explore the politics of racism and racial conflict. While philosophers use the phrase “strategic ignorance” differently than I have used it in sociology, our distinctive treatments of the collective utility of ignorance help shed light on the ways that ignorance can be mobilized by both powerful and vulnerable groups in order to challenge authoritative pronouncements of “fact” and “truth” by influential actors.

“White ignorance” is a concept introduced by the influential Jamaican American philosopher Charles Mills. He defines it as a form of epistemological and ideological supremacy that sustains itself via imposed cognitive structures of unknowing through which the legitimacy of predominantly white, Anglo-American global dominance is perceived (Mills 1997).

While the parameters of “white ignorance” often shift over time, the dominant, enduring feature of white ignorance is that it enables white Americans to misperceive their own worldviews as neutral or universal knowledge rather than carefully constructed mythologies that efface their own group’s history of violence in order to make that history more tolerable to members of the group.

As Mills points out, white ignorance is a type of epistemology, one that consists of patterns of thought that Mills calls “localized and cognitive dysfunctions,” such as the association of whiteness with purity or blackness with evil, or the “us and them” simplifications that shape US perceptions of the US-led war on terror (Mills 1997). White ignorance is not an inert, motionless phenomenon but is rather continually reproduced: an active accomplishment requiring constant awareness of what not to acknowledge publically. It is a type of “curated ignorance,” as sociologist Paul Gilroy describes it (2019), a sort of non-knowledge that reflects the imperative to know “what not to know,” in the words of the anthropologist Michael Taussig (1999).

While the parallels might not seem obvious at first glance, this point has considerable resonance with sociological analyses of the value of ignorance in regulatory and commercial organizations. Contrary to much mainstream work in sociology and management studies that suggests “good” managers seek more information about the effectiveness of their own performances and those of their junior and senior counterparts, it appears that “successful” managers often rely on ignorance rather than knowledge (McGoey 2007 and 2019).

In many cases of bureaucratic and corporate failure, individuals who call attention to regulatory errors are vilified more than those who quietly perpetuate them, a problem that is also evident in efforts to fight for legal redress and equal rights.

As Mills has pointed out, calling attention to injustice can often be dangerous because powerful groups have an incentive to punish people who speak out. Mills gives the example of an African American woman recalling life under Jim Crow racial segregation laws: “My problems started when I began to comment on what I saw ... I insisted on being accurate. But the world I was born into didn’t want that. Indeed, its very survival depended on not knowing, not seeing—and certainly, not saying anything at all about what it was really like” (Mills 2007, 33).

Much like the woman Mills quotes above, whose “problems started when I began to comment on what I saw,” the survival of a range of commercial and regulatory organizations is often, quite rationally, reliant on refusing to articulate or amend their own dysfunction and penalizing those who do.

This last point is why it is counterproductive to delineate “personal ignorance” as something entirely separate from “externally imposed ignorance,” as well as to define strategic ignorance in a way that privileges *individual* ignoring over *collective* ignoring. I probe this problem further in the next section.

## **THE COST OF DISCIPLINARY BIFURCATIONS**

Within psychology, strategic ignorance is commonly defined as a type of confirmation bias, as the personal refusal to acquire new information that conflicts with an individual’s earlier ideological standpoint.

Defined in this somewhat simplistic and pejorative way, the phrase “strategic ignorance” has lately appeared with increasing frequency in the media. In general, mainstream media tend to treat the phenomenon of strategic ignorance, when narrowly defined, as if only ignoramuses would neglect inconvenient information, implying that more rational or intelligent individuals are willing to engage with new information even if it causes personal disadvantage. As that great economist Keynes once quipped: when the facts change, I change my mind; what do you do?

Keynes's quip is seen as a righteous and morally praiseworthy attitude to fact-gathering. But I suggest that it is a false and "under-socialized" view of knowledge and ignorance transmission, in that he naively underestimates the social and political pressures that can lead individuals to face personal risks for not acquiring or acting on information that threatens one's own social status—as well as, importantly, the social status of others.

Recent work by psychologists has helped to nuance the common media portrayal of strategic ignorance by stressing, against Keynes's breezy quip about the ease with which "right-minded" people change their minds, that strategic ignorance is a complex and likely universal tendency, shared by all humans.

And yet, on the other hand, studies such as Gigerenzer and Garcia-Retamero's problematic bifurcation of the social and psychological realm also inadvertently depoliticize the political and social processes that make ignorance acquisition or dissemination more dangerous for some social actors than others.

Where does Keynes's remark leave the African American speaker referred to by Charles Mills—the woman punished for pointing out inconvenient facts? I suggest that it ignores both her specific dilemma and the power of her oppressors, people who are free to see her (to reference work on psychological unseeing developed in a different context by the psychologist Arien Mack [Mack 2003; see also Emejulu and Bassel 2015]) or to choose not to see her at all.

The problem of institutionalized unseeing becomes clearer when we take a quote from a contemporary of Keynes, the US journalist Upton Sinclair, who would often remark during lectures that it's hard "to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on him not understanding it."

In ways, this oft-quoted remark could be simply dismissed as merely witty or even obvious, but taken seriously, the remark points to institutional limits to knowledge acquisition and dissemination that should be kept in mind by all scholars of strategic ignorance—and that can't be empirically investigated or demonstrated in lab-based experiments of strategic ignorance.

Sinclair's remark points to a type of strategic ignorance that becomes visible only once one shifts the methodological gaze beyond the level of the individual, revealing historically produced ignorance that is rarely attributable to any one institutional actor, including corporate actors, but rather is often rooted in collective non-knowledge of the academic reproduction of erroneous assumptions from the past.

To give just one example, Adam Smith, the Scottish economist, is often enlisted today as an authority on the value of a market-based approach to economic exchange that purportedly functions most effectively the less the state is involved in regulating market practices. Smith's actual writing, however, suggests something very different. Although he does mention "the invisible hand" twice in the original publication of *The Wealth of Nations*, he also discusses the value and need for state oversight of corporate practices, including his lengthy analysis of the state's role in book 5.

Throughout *Wealth of Nations*, and in book 5 in particular, Smith discusses the righteousness and value of government regulation of the market in ways that tend to be neglected today. For example, he suggests there is a need for governments to place restrictions on the amount of interest that can be charged on commercial loans, a practice that he hoped would curb the problem of usury. He also calls for the state to ensure the safe construction of building by regulating "party wall" agreements. In short, Smith saw a strong role for the state when it came to infrastructure development and the regulating of banking practices, among a number of other roles, including the provision of public education.

The pro-regulation aspects of Smith's work are little known today, for reasons that are not necessarily "accidental" but also are not "strategic" in the sense that strategic ignorance is associated with, say, the purposefully fostering of uncertainty surrounding the negative health effects of tobacco use.

For example, one reason for the selective way that Smith has been commemorated in the social sciences is the fact that many

abridged volumes of *Wealth of Nations* include only books 1 through 3 of Smith's original *Wealth of Nations*. Book 5, where he talks about the legitimacy of taxation and public infrastructure, has been excised entirely from many popular versions of the book sold throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Sutherland 1997; McGoey 2019). Such selective editing of Smith's work is a type of institutionalized strategic ignorance that is distinctive from the purposeful production of doubt associated with climate change denial or tobacco harms, but nonetheless, it is a type of ignorance that is collectively produced by people who tend not to be seen as perpetrators of ignorance production: scholars.

### **THE VANITY OF REPRESENTATIVENESS**

The failure to appreciate the central importance of ignorance in maintaining power *within* academic disciplines, and within university institutions more broadly, is both a symptom and a cause of a “vanity” that is endemic within the social sciences in general, which is that, to deliberately reverse Michael Polanyi's definition of tacit knowledge (he defined it as “knowing more than we can tell”), social scientists often *tell more than we know*, regularly conveying a sense of conclusiveness that belies our necessarily limited understanding of the phenomena we are engaging with.

By using the term “vanity,” I am drawing on a phrase from the philosopher of science Nancy Cartwright, who, in a discussion of the limits of randomized controlled trials in science and medicine, scrutinizes what she terms the “vanity of rigor” within experimental methods, which “make a huge investment to achieve rigor *inside* their models,” fallaciously assuming such internal rigor renders the models more representative of the external world they purport to reflect (Cartwright 2007, 18).

This “vanity of rigor” bears resemblance to what I have called the “vanity of representativeness” within the social sciences, the idea that the social world is knowable, calculable, and conveyable as long as one adopts the right methodological tools, as long as one

“thickens” one’s description of the social cues or norms influencing different social rituals. As the anthropologist Annelise Riles argues, a hermeneutical and methodological orientation premised on the value of “thick” description can risk losing sight of actions that are deliberately avoided. Thick descriptions can occlude the ways that bureaucratic procedures tend to “point again and again to their own incompleteness” in order to achieve both explicit and implicit institutional goals (Riles 2001, 19).

How might future analyses of strategic ignorance avoid, or at least better acknowledge, the “vanity of representativeness” that is pervasive throughout the social sciences?

As this essay has emphasized, one useful step is to expand the vocabulary for describing the unknown, resisting the seduction of defining a concept such as “strategic ignorance” in a narrow way.

Against narrow definitions, it may be useful to think of strategic ignorance in a twofold way, through the binary of *banal ignorance* and *rarefied ignorance*. While it may seem a little contradictory to describe strategic ignorance as both “banal” and “rarefied,” highlighting the mercurial nature of ignorance is my main intention.

Banal ignorance, I suggest, is the mundane, commonplace tendency for individuals to deliberately shield themselves from uncomfortable information. Banal ignorance is the type of ignorance captured by the behavioral experiments above: the willful refusal of individuals to acquire more information when doing so might impair a personal opportunity or relationship.

Rarefied ignorance, on the other hand, is an *elite* collective resource. Conventionally defined, the word “rarefied” means “belonging to or reserved for a small select group; esoteric.” By stating that ignorance is often “rarefied,” I mean that maintaining a state of unknowability is often the preserve of powerful groups whose political or economic dominance rests on their own ability to legitimately deny they are *purposefully* mobilizing and exploiting their own ignorance and the ignorance of others. This is a type of collective ignorance, often unconscious, that *cannot* be captured through economic experi-

ments that test the procurement or refusal of new information under staged laboratory conditions. Rarefied ignorance is a type of strategic non-knowledge that is deliberately cultivated, but often under institutional or structural conditions that are imperceptible to individual actors—an ignorance asset monopolized by select, elite individuals within different organizations and academic disciplines.

A key example is the dominance of neoclassical economic axioms, which, despite their failure to capture the reality of daily economic processes, are taught and retaught as if they are self-evidently true. As heterodox economists such as Herb Thompson, Ekaterina Svetlova, and Steve Keen have suggested, there are a number of reasons for this disciplinary ignorance. Axioms that were developed as a result of particular historical or social struggles are purposefully divorced from the social context of their development in order to emphasize their timeless universality. Debates over the appropriateness of this approach are simply ignored in undergraduate economics teaching. Generation after generation of undergraduate students are, in Keen's words, "educated into ignorance" (2011, 19).

The fact that such education takes place—that a sort of anti-pedagogy prevails in undergraduate economics teaching—is rooted in the ability of a select group (elite economists at powerful institutions) to misrepresent rarefied ignorance as absolute, universal knowledge. Much like the forms of ignorance that Charles Mills identifies in the myths that white supremacists continue to foment in order to justify the ongoing oppression of people of color, rarefied ignorance is often the preserve of elite groups that have little to gain from exposing it.

The terms "banal" and "rarefied" ignorance are similar to—but also distinctive from—"micro-ignorance" and "macro-ignorance." Both sets of terms have specific analytical utility.

The generality of the terms "micro-ignorance" and "macro-ignorance" helps to underscore the fact that all belief systems and ideologies are prone to the sedimentation of pedestrian acts of ignoring into larger realms of "macro-ignorance." But I am hoping, too, through the notion of "rarefied ignorance," to avoid the problem of

“under-socialization” highlighted above. My aim is to avoid implying that all people ignore in the same way or that people are equally privileged when it comes to the utility of strategic ignorance. Not all “micro-ignorance,” in short, is created equal, nor is it equally powerful in maintaining individual and institutional power.

Instead, it is typically “lay” individuals, and especially less-educated individuals, who tend to be both vilified and punished excessively for appearing “ignorant,” while elites are often presumed to know more because their higher education granted them a more rarefied education. And yet, as the example of Adam Smith shows and as critical historians have long emphasized, scholars themselves may be particularly blind to the shortcomings of their own understandings of history because the robustness of their education hinders them from perceiving historical errors stemming from the selective, self-serving ways that the past has been represented in academic texts. The term “rarefied ignorance” is intended to underscore the ways that “macro-ignorance” often results from *elite* ignorance rather than lay or everyday ignorance.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this essay is to illuminate some of the conceptual and methodological dangers that ignorance studies scholars currently face, partly as a result of the success of our earlier studies. The biggest danger is that the growing mainstream acknowledgment of the utility of ignorance leads to a generalized acceptance of the universality of strategic ignorance in a way that abandons the need for analytical attention to the hierarchical, stratified ways that people and groups exploit strategic ignorance differently.

In short, my concern is that we may be flipping surprisingly quickly from economic maxims that suggest it is universally rational to want to know more, to new axioms that suggest it is universally rational to *not* want to know. This switch—while far more epistemologically robust and realistic than earlier attitudes toward ignorance—

has worrying exculpatory potential for powerful groups because it suggests that the “will to ignore” uncomfortable knowledge, while lamentable, is only human and thus more excusable. It risks displacing nuanced consideration of how relationships of power affect the ability to know, the effort not to hear, and the refusal to speak openly about what is already known.

Consider Charles Mills’s example about the African American woman who faces punishment for being accurate. Moving forward, this example helps scholars of ignorance to ask not merely *whether* people universally ignore the inconvenient but also *who* is punished most for the refusal to cease unknowing? How are they punished? How is their punishment rationalized? Such questions may lead to a new sort of enlightenment, toward a reckoning with human ignorance and unknowability that was started many years ago but is still not anywhere close to being fulfilled.

## NOTES

1. This essay draws on my book, *The Unknowers* (2019), where I introduced the concepts of “micro-ignorance” and “macro-ignorance,” as well as on earlier articles where terms such as “antistrategies” are developed. My discussion of “banal” and “rarefied ignorance” included therein appeared previously in German in my chapter in P. Wehling’s 2013 edited book, *Vom Nutzen des Nichtwissen*.

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