

## BOOK REVIEWS

### ***Miseducation: A history of ignorance-making in America and abroad*, edited by A.J. Angulo**

Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016, 384pp., £21.50 (pbk), ISBN 978-1-4214-1932-9

In this edited book, A.J. Angulo introduces a number of interesting papers that all focus on various aspects of the social construction of ignorance. The aim of the book is to extend the application of the concept of agnotology (the systematic study of ignorance-making), proposed by science historian Robert Proctor, to other areas of social science. Relying on the concept as the common theoretical frame, each chapter explores unique cases in which dominant sociopolitical forces attempt to keep the public ignorant about certain issues by using the means of public discourse production in order to advance their group interest. Angulo highlights this central dimension in the following words: '...slaveholders, radio broadcasters, politicians, religious figures, and corporate executives all shared the common goal of suppressing forms of knowledge considered threatening or disruptive to their interests' (340). To achieve this objective, the book presents historical and contemporary examples of the ways in which powerful groups used coercive and non-coercive means to subjugate their rivals and other social groups in an attempt to perpetuate their privileges.

At a time when the media is revealing confidential information, as in the case of leaked Panama Papers and intelligence papers leaked by Edward Snowden, the publication of the book, which expands on the social construction of ignorance, is very timely. The current state of affairs in international politics in which ultra-conservative movements are on the rise also underlines the relevance of the main proposition of the book, which is to investigate the relationship between dominant discourses and power through the theoretical lens of agnotology. The application of the concept to a number of unique situations in the book can encourage social researchers to make more ambitious attempts to reveal different facets of the domination of powerful groups.

The book consists of fourteen chapters in three parts: legalizing ignorance, mythologizing ignorance, and nationalizing and globalizing ignorance. The first part includes the cases of instrumentalization of law by powerful groups to dominate other segments of society. Tolley's chapter draws attention to the enactment of anti-literacy laws in the nineteenth century, particularly in Georgia and many other southern states of the USA, in an effort to keep the black population subservient to the interest of white groups. Graves's chapter looks into court decisions in regard to the censorship of content on lesbians and gays in the curriculum as well as the purge of gay and lesbian teachers from their jobs. In the context of the efforts of dominant sociopolitical forces to suppress sexual minority identities in education, Graves raises a central question of why ignorance persists longer in education when compared with other spheres of cultural life. Her answer reads: 'it takes longer for cultural change to permeate schools because they are firmly embedded within a network of other institutions' (61). The conception of education that underpins the question asked and the answer given provides a new angle for exploring educational issues.

The second part pays attention to the ways in which dominant groups instilled some myths in young minds through education. Perlstein's chapter presents the experience of the public schools of Arthurdale, West Virginia. In these schools, students from working class families were provided with an education premised on the principles of progressive education in which no consideration was given to students' local histories and socio-economic identities. Perlstein

construes this omission as a deliberate attempt to keep the public in a state of ignorance about their own realities. In a similar way, Tamura's chapter focuses on the problematic aspects of the myth of model minority identity, which involves portraying Asian Americans with positive qualities with an intention to derogate other minorities, especially African Americans. Laats's chapter expands on the concerted efforts of conservative evangelical Protestants to infuse their religious narrative of the history of the USA into the curriculum. Even though conservative evangelicals represent a religious minority, their influence in the textbook industry enabled them to 'replace mainstream [history] knowledge in accord with the beliefs of a cultural minority' (178). The chapter demonstrates a fascinating case in which a minority group can massively influence the mainstream history narrative through its influence on the means of public discourse production.

The last part of the book presents individual country cases where education took an active part in the social construction of ignorance: the USA, Germany, the Soviet Union, Israel, and China. Jarvinen's chapter expands on a discursive battle in the USA between those who favoured annexation of the Philippines following the 1898 war and those who stood against the annexation. The annexationists used the terms 'imperial', 'imperialism', and 'colony' in deliberate ways to code them in public memory with positive connotations, whereas the anti-annexationists made efforts to uncover the inconsistencies surrounding the ways the annexationists used the terms. The contestation over the meaning of concepts is a good illustration of the relationship between dominant discourses and power. Pine's chapter takes a look at the censorship imposed on arts, literature, and school textbooks in Nazi Germany. The other chapters of this part shed light on similar cases from the Soviet Union (Ewing), Israel (Vered and Bar-Tal), and China (Han and Smith), where education was used to spread a positive representation of social groups holding political power. What is common in all cases here is that dominant groups use the means of public discourse to suppress alternative visions and identities in an effort to mainstream their own visions and identities as the 'legitimate' ones and maintain their privileged status in the society.

As a word of criticism, one can argue that the concept of agnotology does not work equally well for all the cases explored in the book. The concept seems to be better suited to situations in which those who spread misinformation are sure that they are deliberately obscuring the dissemination of scientifically proved knowledge. For instance, Elliott's chapter presents a good example of the application of the concept by uncovering the strategies corporate bodies used to obscure the dissemination of scientific knowledge regarding tobacco use and climate change. In fact, the concept was originally employed to investigate 'cases like tobacco, asbestos, and climate change' about which corporate bodies and government agencies attempted to keep the public ignorant in the pursuit of their economic interest (5). However, the concept does not work so well when applied to situations where powerful groups imposed their ideological perspectives to the whole or a part of society. Such cases are more than a sole act of ignorance-making and require more comprehensive conceptual tools. Considering different means of domination by powerful groups as agnotological cases is a reductionist approach. The effort of Zionists to portray the Israeli government as peace-loving cannot be investigated with the same conceptual tool that proved effective in the case of exploring the efforts of corporate bodies to cast doubt on scientific knowledge about tobacco use. In the first case, the agents of the 'agnotological act' are not aware that they are spreading misinformation, whereas in the second case, the agents make deliberate attempts to block the dissemination of scientific knowledge. Therefore, I would suggest that the concept of agnotology must be redefined to better explore the first type of case, as its application to the two different cases does not seem to be consistently effective.

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