



When Fools Rule

Popular Expertise and Elite Ignorance in the Field of Migration

Erschienen in: Populäre Expertise | Popular Expertise

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The problem of popular ignorance about the causes and consequences of modern crises has received much attention from generations of philosophers, social scientists, educators and policymakers. Aristotle believed the average person is an idiot who is unfit to make political decisions. The converse problem — the ignorance of elites — has been largely neglected. Indeed, the very idea of elite ignorance may seem strange. Aren't elites almost by definition the ones who possess knowledge? Isn't knowledge a prerequisite of power? How can the ignorant rule?

One of the lessons of recent and ongoing crises (COVID-19, refugees, climate change, etc.) and the corresponding media discourses is that political, social and cultural elites are no more resilient to misinformation, self-deception and plain bullshit¹ than ordinary people. The media contexts of climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic provide striking examples of the inability or unwillingness of many politicians, journalists, popular actors and athletes to absorb basic scientific facts. Political elites in particular tend to

ignore and downplay the independent advice of scientists in order not to antagonize and stir up the masses. This in turn creates the impression among many knowledgeable people that they are ruled by fools.

The case of migration

Anthropogenic climate change and the pandemic are examples of global crises where academic expertise, sometimes supported by non-academic, popular expertise, is indispensable for any durable solution, and where politics is often slow to do what needs to be done. But not all modern crises are born equal. The contested field of migration, for example, is very different from the situations created by the current pandemic or climate change. Unlike the virus or the relentless rise of carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere, the desire to migrate in search of a better life is nothing new, but part of human nature. Modern humanity wouldn't exist without people moving and mixing all over the world. Also, there is no consensus as to whether the sudden spikes in immigration we have seen in recent years ever came close to a "crisis."²

Two other differences are characteristic of the migration field. First, the prominent place of popular or public expertise, which sometimes but not always interacts with academic research, and second, the equally prominent place of different kinds of ignorance.

It is often assumed that pro-migration ideas originate from liberal elites but can't gain popular traction. However, this common story can also be turned around. First of all, at the level of everyday life, there is a wealth of popular knowledge about how to work and live together in multicultural societies, and how to manage hyperdiverse cities, neighborhoods or classrooms. Moreover, in response to migration and refugee movements in recent years, countless artistic productions have been created by or in collaboration with migrants (think, for example, of the Good Chance Theatre in Calais, the Platforma Arts + Refugees Network in England or the German photography project "Wir sprechen fotografisch").



An upcoming arts festival in London presenting alternative ways of knowing about Syria, its people, migrants, and culture.

Closer to migration politics, in recent years we have seen the massive production of popular and popularized expertise by critical NGOs, activist networks and migrants themselves. This expertise manifests itself in the documentation of border violence and illegal pushbacks, statistics on migrant deaths, or the critique of dominant ways of visualizing migrants and migration. The video investigations by the London-based Forensic Architecture team are a prominent example. In one of its most spectacular and shocking recent works, which I saw earlier this year at the Salzburg Museum of Modern Art, the team uses various visual and documentary resources to show that armed Greek soldiers shot and killed a young refugee called Muhammad al-Arab, from Aleppo, Syria, on March 2, 2020.³

My point is that these types of widely disseminated popular expertise are regularly blocked out from the sanitized knowledge systems of political elites and policymakers who often *prefer not to know*. How can we make sense of this situation, and what should be done about it?

Three types of ignorance

To answer these questions, I talked to my colleague Stephan Scheel, a young migration scholar at the University of Duisburg-Essen and an expert in the growing field of “ignorance studies.” The first thing I learned is that the least consequential kind of ignorance is not knowing the facts. Even the most knowledgeable experts know only very little about the world. As humans, we are all doomed to live “in the Night of our natural Ignorance,” as Thomas Hobbes wrote.⁴

More relevant is the ignorance people deliberately or instinctively *choose*. This too is a ubiquitous phenomenon which, however, is much more harmful when it occurs among the ruling elites. Researchers have called strategic or deliberate ignorance a cultural phenomenon, even a “cultural skill.”⁵ Just like knowledge, non-knowledge (or ignorance) must be actively produced and transformed into attitudes, practices or skills.⁶ This is what exclusionary migration regimes do. These regimes are based on the power to define the boundaries of legitimate expertise beyond which the night of popular ignorance begins. The power to exclude or ignore certain types of expertise is at work everywhere in debates about migration. We have all witnessed how the knowledge about human rights violations or the wider consequences of the increasing militarization of borders⁷ are minimized by referring to the “bigger picture,” practical constraints or the progress that is underway despite appearances to the contrary. Similarly, the knowledge about the massive contribution of migrants and their descendants to the welfare of society is frequently downplayed for the sake of catering to the perceived “fears” and “concerns” of the natives.

A third type of elite ignorance in migration politics is the historical and contemporary phenomenon of “white ignorance” of racial and ethnic inequality.⁸ White ignorance means that members of elite groups are sometimes unaware or in denial of their own privileged position compared to other groups such as migrants or refugees. This type of ignorance has serious social consequences in the field of migration and beyond. It makes political decisions in favor of marginalized groups less likely, thus perpetuating the harm inflicted

on members of these groups. On top of this, it is an insult to less privileged people to live in a society run by elites who are foolish enough to ignore the plain fact of their own elevated status.

Powerful fools

Classical fools, Shakespearean or otherwise, were figures who were allowed to poke holes in anyone, including the ruler, and who shared their own popular expertise from an unthreatening position below or outside of the political power structure. Today, however, we see a shift away from the witty and wise fool who speaks truth to power to a new species of fools who aspire to *replace* the ruler and dismiss both popular and scientific expertise as fake news. What political scientists euphemistically call “populism” can be characterized as the rise of a new class of clownish or foolish politicians who turn their white ignorance into a weapon. They resemble the unwise fool in Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, who has only his own benefit in mind, breaks all covenants that are not useful to him and falls prey to cognitive biases in reasoning.⁹ In this situation, better communication strategies aimed at sharing expertise with the ruling elites are of little use, because their members are likely to actively – and passionately – avoid information that threatens their privileged position.

References

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