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Conclusion: the powers of ignorance: on finding out what to do next

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This afterword places the three articles in the context of recent developments in the anthropology of knowledge as it relates to sociability. The articles illustrate again that sociability is more a matter of finding out what is happening, and then doing something about it, than a matter of applying earlier knowledge. The papers are part of a movement in anthropology with roots in the work of people like Garfinkel, Rancière, de Certeau, Lave, etc. In various ways they focused our attention on the matters that appear in the three papers included here: the acknowledgment of ignorance is always productive, though what is done next can be quite dangerous for many of those involved. Furthermore, the learning that participation produces soon reveals itself insufficient and a new form of ignorance. In all events, ignorance leads to social interaction in all its modalities. Ignorance is not a barrier to sociability.

Keywords: anthropology; conversation; ignorance; practice; reproduction

For school people, policy makers, and scientists, ignorance is a simple matter. It is a state of misfortune to be remedied by the benevolent state. What many in anthropology are now discovering is that this common sense must be challenged. Ignorance is most probably not a state. And it is not always a misfortune. Ignorance can be a dangerous collective achievement by those given the task of organizing proper knowledge, identifying those who do not have it, and then designing the policies needed to cure the ignorant of their disease. But ignorance can also be a prod to the kind of individual action that leads to a transformation of one's position, locally, or more broadly. It can be used and abused, in many wonderful, and not so wonderful, ways. In any event, ignorance is something for anthropologists to explore in all its modalities.

Doerr, Konishi, Kumagai and Sato, the authors of the three papers in this mini special issue, are typical of a generation of anthropologists who are proceeding with this exploration.[1] They are concerned with what people do with what they (do not) know, as well as with what people do with their identifications as, possibly, people who (do not) know. These anthropologists are leaving aside the old problematics of 'learning' as a noun for that which needs to have been learned. They are recapturing the progressivity of the verb: learn-*ing* is an act that cannot be completed, for anything that is learned will lead to new questions. In the process, these anthropologists are raising fundamental questions about sociability, as well as the elaboration of the forms of collaboration which we in the discipline deem 'culture'.

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Anthropology, of course, may be best known for the claim that full participation in any human activity requires forms of knowledge, particularly the knowledge of the 'cultural' forms of this participation. In this tradition, full participation is based on this knowledge for, as about all text books write, 'culture is learned'. Not so paradoxically, anthropology is also famous for the claim that this knowledge disappears from awareness into the 'taken-for-granted' or the 'common sense'. In different though related theoretical ways, anthropology (sociology) has placed enculturation (socialization) at the functional center of sociability – as it was for example in Parsons' attempt at a grand integration of the social sciences (Parsons & Shils, 1951). Lack of proper socialization was blamed for any number of problems from poverty (Lewis, 1966) to the travails of immigrants and other newcomers. And all this was reconstituted by Bourdieu's making 'disposition inculcated in the earliest years of life' (1977/1972, p. 15) necessary to the reproduction of social fields even as he insisted that institutions needed the 'misrecognition' of these dispositions (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977/1970, p. 61). Like a classical anthropologist, Bourdieu made particular forms of focused (indeed learned) ignorance functionally necessary for complex social reproduction. And he led generations of subsequent researchers to assume that this ignorance could not be productive – except for expert analysts who would reveal reality to the ignorant masses. These are the traditions the new generation of anthropologists challenge.

For example, Kumagai and Sato directly struggle with the more usual ways of dealing with language learning and the metapragmatics of language performance. They do not simply show, as is often done, what people who do not speak Japanese need to know in order to pass as Japanese in Japan. Rather, they trace what can happen to a disparate group of visitors to Japan as they play with their relative ignorance of Japanese, as well as with their sometimes erroneous identifications as people who (do not) know Japanese. Kumagai and Sato show that everyone makes mistakes including Japanese speakers who misidentify Asian-looking visitors as 'people who know Japanese', or European-looking visitors as 'people who do not know Japanese'. And then Kumagai and Sato illustrate what everyone can do with the various situations that arise, and this includes lying about knowing Japanese – that is, passing as ignorant. (Not) knowing Japanese can be a resource as well as a problem, and the problems, when they arise, have little to do with what else one might need to know fully to 'pass' as a native speaker of Japanese.

Kumagai and Sato, as well as the other authors, thus point us towards a relatively new tradition of concern with the powers of ignorance. More and more anthropologists, along with sociologists and linguists concerned with everyday life, are discovering that there is no warrant for making knowledge of anything the functional basis of sociability. It is the reverse that will prove fundamental. In brief, what was done (said) *last*, in any setting and for any purpose, is unlikely to be what has to be done *next*, even in the same setting and for the same purpose, because what will have happened *now*, between *last* and *next*, is most likely to have subtly changed the conditions that made *last* sensible – if only because *next* will have to take into account what was done (said) *now*. One never bathes in the same river and the wise person (and that is about everyone) will check the conditions of the river before bathing in it again. And this is all the more important because it is precisely 'the same river' of everyday common sense that is most likely to surprise.

The concern with the temporality of human interaction, as well as the practical consequences of its unpredictabilities, is not new.[2] It was the foundation of all forms of pragmatism, most clearly perhaps in George Herbert Mead's emphasis on *conversation* as the basis of all meaning. In this sense, meaning is not a state of mind but something that remains open until there is a response to the response to the first statement in the conversation. Thus meaning is, at best, a temporary achievement open to ongoing re-interpretation.

A recent paper on 'mis-takes' in jazz improvisation makes this case most graphically (Klemp et al., 2008): when you make a mistake, repeat it! And in so doing, the performance will be seen as 'original', 'exciting', 'the mark of a genius', rather than a 'mistake'.

Recognizing the power of the *next* (i.e., a repeated note, a statement identifying someone as speaking Japanese) has been difficult. The first generation of (social) psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists who built on the various forms of pragmatism that they found most congenial emphasized the construction of an altogether stable 'self' through such conversations, and the functional need for such selves for conversations to continue. But this movement to the learned took us away from what was most original in pragmatism, and that is precisely the emphasis on the interactional, and thus on the temporal, and thus on the ongoing uncertainty about what is to happen *next* and what difference this will make. Sociability is moved[3] by the ignorance that keeps revealing itself in the conduct of everyday life (including the everyday life of the powerful as they plan the policies many people will have to live by). This is something that Garfinkel started teaching sociologists in the late 1940s (2006), and which he keeps teaching (2002) – with many more warrants for doing so.

There are many versions of this evolution in the anthropological take on knowledge. I will mention Lave and Wenger's modeling of movement in 'communities of practice' (1991). In that movement, 'learning' is a product of participation in any of the temporary positions one may occupy. By implication, the movement into a peripheral position is dependent on a mutual acknowledgment of ignorance. Learning is never a prerequisite for participation, even if the powerful say so, or particularly if they do say so. In recent years Jacques Rancière has made a related argument repeatedly (1999/1987, 2004/1983) as he developed a critique of the classical views of knowledge and learning, from Plato onwards, into a call to pay close attention to the work of the ignorant to teach themselves and others what they might decide they need to know.

As Rancière challenges philosophical strictures about proper knowledge, he asks us to wonder, among other matters, about the encounter between, to simplify, a first time mother and her new-born child as the two of them figure out what will work well enough for them to proceed with their lives together. He asks us to look at this moment as a moment when two wills to know meet and teach each other. He insists that, when considering this encounter, we do not start with assumptions of passive ignorance and automatic 'development' but rather with the assumption that the encounter must trigger activity by all involved. During the encounter the ignorant teaches the ignorant and both keep learning different matters.

Fantasies about the encounter between naive mother and new-born child are at the core of Konishi's paper. Konishi mostly writes about Japanese policy-makers, journalists and school people (for example the manager of a children's center) as they make themselves fear the 'ignorant mother'. Mothers, the speakers of this official discourse keep telling each other, do not know that their babies' urine does not turn blue on disposable diapers! 'Given that is so', and Konishi does not report much doubt about the verisimilitude of this tale, 'thus' there is a problem and those in authority (the State in all its forms) should intervene. Of course, none of the mothers Konishi talked to could believe anybody would imagine them that ignorant. They knew that urine is yellow, but they did not know that policy-makers had convinced themselves that mothers were ignorant of something that basic. The whole thing could be funny if it did not lead to potentially serious consequences for these very mothers if they are made the target of state policies. When the benevolent powerful intervene, much can go wrong (McDermott & Varenne, 1995).

Konishi does not directly address the core issue but it remains: how do the meetings of inexperienced human beings, one of them a new-born infant, get organized and, almost always, allow for the survival of all – very often as an altogether profoundly satisfying experience? How do infants figure out how to get their care-giver to do what they need? How do care-givers find out not only 'what infants are like', nor even solely 'what this infant is like', but also 'what this infant just did that she has never done before so that all we know about her has now become obsolete'?

These issues have to be brought out if anthropologists are to do more than bemoan the apparently willful ignorance of policy-makers caricaturing those for whom they make themselves responsible. Blaming those who blame has been an anthropological trope, at least since our colleagues (Rainwater & Yancey, 1967) began criticizing those who moved Great Society programs in the 1960s by invoking the ignorance of the poor. The same trope can also be seen in all the anthropological writing against development discourses in post-colonial settings. Anthropologists, of course, must continue to ferret those moments when the powerful justify their actions by claiming that benevolence is the guide for the officially knowledgeable when they organize for the teaching of canonical knowledge. Too often, making certain forms of knowledge canonical leads to various forms of violence. This is the core of Rancière's critique of Plato and Socrates – and it can also be a critique of anthropology. But such a critique can only go so far if it is not also accompanied by an analysis of the processes through which policies about knowledge and its consequences are made.[4]

Konishi starts on this way by tracing the Japanese government's attempts to confront a decline in the birth rate, and then the consequences of earlier policies. It may not be far-fetched to argue that the problem for policy-makers and all agents of the State is their ongoing discovery of their own ignorance of what it is that mothers might (not) know or how to get them to know it. To the extent that anthropologists ('we') are inevitably agents of the State (through our positioning in universities and, not so rarely, in the State apparatus itself), then we must also pay attention to what it is that we construct as ignorance, and for what purposes.

The overall context for Doerr's question is related to the same issue. She addresses the practical consequences of a recent transformation of the New Zealand state as it made itself into the bicultural New Zealand/Aotearoa. She invites us to examine the experience of some people's inability to understand a speech in one of the official languages of their nation. This is getting to be a common experience around the world as more and more State or religious institutions represent themselves in public settings as multilingual through performances conducted in the various official languages. However one may want to evaluate the prescription of these performances, one must wonder, as an anthropologist, what the people who plan, and then sit through, these performances do while listening to what they do not understand, and, more significantly, what they will do *next*. Will they attempt to learn the language they do not understand? Will they just sit quietly doing nothing? Will they try to stop the performances? Doerr gives us evidence of the two latter strategies. She wonders why so few 'Pākehā' appear to be learning Te Reo (Māori), and thus asks us to wonder about the kind of acknowledgment of ignorance that leads to a decision *not* to seek apparently needed knowledge, but rather to seek the transformation of the conditions that produced this ignorance.

There are many conditions when people may end up accepting publicized ignorance. Exploring these conditions needs to be generalized. Consider Doerr's case. Of all the people who left Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and settled around the world, only those who now reside in some islands of the South Pacific get named 'Pākehā'

and made into people 'who do not know Te Reo'. Most simply, this is another case when ignorance can be considered a collective achievement in the history of a particular people. This directly echoes Durkheimian and Boasian strictures about deviance and criminality. It is also an echo of Foucault's concern with discipline and punishment (1979/1975), though with a twist since the decision *not* to learn Te Reo can be considered an act of potential violence against some Māori, or at least an act of passive resistance against a state policy.

The sociological tradition taught us that not all forms of ignorance will have the same consequences. Most of us do not know most of what could possibly be known but, mostly, this ignorance does not make a difference in our actual lives. But then there are those matters that become matters of publicized knowledge and ignorance. What is to happen about this subset, and what difference public acknowledgment should make in the lives of whom, should now be our analytic problem in a much more focused way than it has been. Anthropology has often been caught by the charge to identify those forms of ignorance that should *then* be remedied by the State (for example mothers in Japan should receive parent education). The more radical anthropologists have sought to identify the forms of ignorance that should lead to changes in the State. But anthropologists must first systematize the analysis of the production of acknowledged ignorance, and particularly of the conditions that lead to determined searches for new knowledge.

What is most important here, as we continue our work, is to notice that the authors of these papers challenge us to go beyond the simple deconstruction of the historical that highlights the hidden fault lines of power and resistance. By placing their illustrative anecdotes in ongoing political conversations (rather than in apparently closed reproductive systems), they suggest that every 'solution' to an earlier problem opens new avenues for confusion, resistance, and the call for further solutions. To take one example of New Zealand where Doerr took us, Ilona Gershon (2007) has shown how the official making of the country into a 'bi-cultural' one has produced new conditions and new modes and discourses of political action for non-Māori Pacific Islanders, particularly people from Samoa, who are now numerous enough to wonder loudly why they should not be given some of the same symbolic and practical advantages now given to the Māori.

It may well be that cultural mechanisms get designed to reproduce themselves, and particularly to reproduce the privileges that some acquire through the constitution of particular orders. People, particularly when they find themselves in situations when the current forms are advantageous, will probably struggle mightily to reproduce these forms. Such attempts have been made throughout history. But, as history has also taught us, the mightiest empires are eventually ruined. Reproduction, we are now finding out, is not possible – even though some forms may last a very long time. As soon as one shifts from modeling the properties of a particular state to looking at the original events in their temporality, then one is confronted with the ongoing efforts to find out what is going on and then to plan a life around what has just been found out.[5] To use examples from the papers, we see people asking 'should I be known as (not) knowing Japanese with these people I just met?'; 'what should we do with ignorant mothers?'; 'what am I supposed to do with the Māori speeches I will have to listen to?'.[6] In all cases, the issue is not failed enculturation into the proprieties of 'one's own culture', or the misunderstandings arising from a deeply embedded *habitus*. Note how, in the cases presented here, the ignorance that reveals itself is particularly significant as it proceeds from 'natives' wondering about each other: In Konishi's paper, it is the Japanese who worry about the Japanese. In Doerr's, it is the Pākehā worrying about the Pākehā.

The general issue, then, is not 'having to have learned' so that one can participate common-sensically if not peacefully but 'having to learn' because one cannot escape participation in settings or fields where one finds out one is altogether ignorant as to what to do *next* given the conditions one discovers one is *now* in. Ignorance is at the core of cultural production. It has to be the driving force of the evolution or drifting of cultural forms. For anthropology, this is an invitation to shift from deconstruction to the careful tracing of ongoing constructions, their conditions, the resources needed, and the often unplanned consequences that create further trouble for all.

Notes

1. For more on this kind of work, see the papers in a recent collection (Varenne, 2008).
2. The statistical regularities and correlations that have been used since Durkheim at least to justify sociology can be useful for certain purposes but they are precisely irrelevant for the conduct of everyday life in its detail. Knowing what 'most people' do in a setting is not much of a guide when attempting to deal with *this* person *now*.
3. I use the word 'moved' here to keep the emphasis on temporality. I could have used the word 'produced' that would have indexed some of the conversations about the 'production of culture' that have now started. There are good reasons to distinguish various forms of production/ construction/change/etc. 'Movement' here is chosen for its vagueness.
4. Recently, Koyama (2008) has presented an exemplary analysis of a similar case in the context of school policies to eradicate school failure.
5. This is not the place to explicate the distinction I am making here. It should be emphasized however that there is a major difference between modeling conditions (what was labeled a 'structural analysis' in the Saussurian sense) and proposing that this model is, in some way, a concrete reality. Modeling, however, is absolutely essential.
6. Many other examples from recent research could also be cited here. I will just cite two analyses of the practical confusion engendered by the practical consequentialities of American race talk (Pollock, 2004; Lin, 2007). The more encultured one is, it might be possible to hypothesize, the more likely it is that one will be at a loss about how to identify oneself or others in many of the moments and settings when and where race identification is called for.

Notes on contributor

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