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On Agnotology as Built-in Ignorance

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Re-reading Francis Nyamnjoh's essay on the elephant and the blind men has stirred up lots of thoughts, regrets and soul-searching on my part. For one thing, the piece reminds me of the book by Nicholas Thomas (1989), *Out of Time*, and about the making of ignorance. Thomas says that Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown was the first "professional" anthropologist in history – that is, he was trained as an anthropologist and made a living from his anthropological endeavours. He wanted to turn anthropology into a serious professional activity. To achieve this, in a fully Durkheimian tradition, he declared before the social science community that, from that point forward, only the data collected by professional and trained anthropologists working in a canonical fieldwork situation should be accepted to feed the anthropological machine. In so doing, Radcliffe-Brown disqualified all the information produced by the traveller, the merchant, the soldier, the missionary. I would add to Thomas' list the local literati (in Arabic or other local languages, or in European precolonial and colonial languages), as well as literature, cinema, and other cultural and artistic productions. In one word, Radcliffe-Brown disqualified the elephant. Given the fact that the historical dynamics of societies have been partially shaped and defined by trade, power relations, conquests, religious movements, etc., Radcliffe-Brown's statement was quite bold. Ruling out the knowledge produced by the merchant, the missionary, the military and other sources amounts to excluding many direct insights made by "unprofessional" anthropologists into certain societies. In other words,

and according to Nicholas Thomas, Radcliffe-Brown disqualified everything that belongs to the historicity of societies.

Anthropology is still paying a high price for this “professional turn”. The turn was well intended, and it certainly produced an enormous amount of high-quality knowledge about many different societies. However, it was also clearly a *coup* instigated by Radcliffe-Brown and his supporters in order to enjoy a monopoly over a certain domain of knowledge and to achieve the position of power that goes along with it. Academic anthropology still has to be dislodged from this power position. This also raises questions regarding anthropology’s power relationships with other academic pursuits, and with their departments, chairs, budgets, and so on. Such questions demand a broader critique of academia as a dominant and classist pursuit.

One of the implications of the metaphor of the elephants (and, incidentally, of the book by Nicholas Thomas) is the fact that any production of knowledge is also a production of ignorance: The limited knowledge produced by the three blind men amounts to producing ignorance about the elephant. There is a new field of study that has appeared over the last few years: agnotology, the study of ignorance.¹ It is the flipside of the coin: On the one side, there is epistemology, the study of the conditions of knowledge or science, and on the other side, agnotology. *Any* production of knowledge regarding the elephant produces ignorance about it. Any production of anthropological knowledge *à la* Radcliffe Brown produced ignorance precisely because of, and not despite, its epistemological choices and acumen. Agnotology was first developed by Robert Proctor (1995) in order to study the way certain agents deliberately produce false knowledge (for example, about tobacco, asbestos, pharmaceutical drugs). However, I feel free to extend its domain of relevance to include the way anytime we produce some kind of knowledge, ignorance is a by-product thereof.

This unwitting production of ignorance (“built-in ignorance”), in my view, comes through quite clearly in Nyamnjoh’s comments about white Africans in the first part of his essay. Anthropology has tended to study the dominated, the colonized, the black, the African – not the dominant, white African. In his comments on Nyamnjoh’s paper, Andrew Spiegel² points out the fact that funding agencies have encouraged this tendency, as if the secret can be examined only by focusing on the poor, the colonized, the dominated.³ That is, this tendency has created some knowledge, but also some ignorance. Pierre Bourdieu (1984), instead, insisted on the fact that the secret could very well reside with the symbolic violence and the entrenched

1 See <www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agnotology>.

2 Department of Anthropology, University of Cape Town.

3 Personal communication with Francis Nyamnjoh.

positions of the rich, the colonizer, the dominant. In France, I know of only a small handful of scholars who have taken Bourdieu's approach seriously and have studied the high bourgeoisie, mostly Michel Pinçon and Monique Pinçon-Charlot (2007, 2010). They have succeeded in entering into the salons and clubs of the very high class of the French bourgeoisie and aristocracy, taking advantage, for one thing, of the fact that this is probably the only true social class in France with a clear consciousness of belonging, and that it is equipped with the corresponding institutions – the clubs, the exclusive schools, the rallies, the common residential quarters with a real community life, an *entre soi*. Surely these few scholars are also aware that members of this class are very keen to control their image and are therefore open to allowing CNRS⁴ left-wing sociologists to know everything about how wonderful they themselves are. The result is that one begins to understand very clearly not only the sources of the political, cultural and economic strength of that social class, but also the domination it commands.

Nyamnjoh's essay is particularly bold and outspoken. Can it preempt its being pigeonholed by academia into the category of "subaltern" or "post-colonial" statements, therefore depriving it of its sting? As regards the situation of anthropology in South Africa, I had not realized that the situation was that bad. Maybe my impressions during conferences attended in Stellenbosch⁵ and at the Department of Anthropology in UCT were misleading. They were perhaps not the most useful vantage points from which to gain a true notion of what was going on in South Africa, or in Southern Africa as a whole. But Nyamnjoh's insight, of course, is not limited to the situation in South Africa: It is all over the world. Going back to Nicholas Thomas and built-in ignorance, I can more and more clearly understand the case made by Nyamnjoh for works of fiction to be included in the study in anthropology (although I am totally incapable of writing fiction, and that says a lot about my training and habitus). To make a final comment on fiction: The metaphor of the elephant and the blind men is quite telling as a rhetorical literary trope. I love such stories. They are very effective, indeed: true pieces of agnotology.

There is one such story that has been widely circulated in French academic circles; it has several versions, like all such stories. It concerns two universities, each with a rowing crew. They have a yearly race against each other, like in Oxford on the Thames. For two years in a row, Crew A wins the race against Crew B. The provost of University B consults with the dean

4 CNRS = Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (National Center for Scientific Research).

5 Decennial Anthropology Southern Africa Conference, "The Futures of Culture", Stellenbosch University, 3–6 September 2011.

of his management school. The dean orders an audit. As a result, Crew B is entirely reorganized. For the next two years in a row, B is again defeated by A. The provost of University B consults again with the dean of management, who orders a second audit. What they find is that Crew A is composed of one coxswain and eight oarsmen. Crew B, instead, is made up of one quality expert specializing in oars, one expert in team management, one consultant in sports efficiency, etc., and only one oarsman. The dean and the provost conclude that with such a clearly competent team, Crew B has no excuse for not winning the race – it only means that the single oarsman is inefficient. They decide to give him the sack, causing the team to dissolve. With the money the university has saved in the process, big bonuses are given to the dean, the provost and the auditor.

What this means is that, quite frequently, reform efforts in academia are well intended, but in reality they fail to solve the initially detected problem, which may then be forgotten for decades. But the problem remains: Crew B has not won a single race; or, to circle back to anthropology, the elephant is still the unknown beast not entitled to express itself.

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