



Ignorance: a global history

The global history of ignorance becomes a mysterious subject when we define ignorance as the absence of knowledge. Is it possible to talk about history of something absent? The author proves that the matter is not as simple as it may seem, though the general concept of ignorance as given above is generally accepted. So, ignorance only makes sense when it is defined through knowledge, but there are many ways to arrive at its definition, especially if the philosophers are involved. The 'known unknowns' and 'unknown unknowns' and other types and kinds of ignorance come into being, such as collective ignorance and female ignorance, and ignorance of religions, and agnosticism.

In other words, there are many different groups of people who at different times were ignorant of some matters and at other times of others. There are many things that are unknown to a certain level by majority of us in geography and history, business and military matters, and many other things. There is even ignorance of science, which seems to be the essence of scientific activity. Moreover, certain people and groups of people are deliberately kept ignorant to keep them in control by other groups, and one of the remarkable examples is the centuries-long ban on women's education.

The deliberate ignorance, secrecy and cover-ups, ignoring the past, censorship and misinformation, lying and denying are a variety of ways to remain ignorant or to be kept ignorant. In parallel with these ways different means are applied to uncover knowledge, such as spying and whistleblowing, exploration and publicizing discoveries and many more.

These are just some topics covered in the book that draw my attention by its intriguing title. Each such topic has been explored in different historical circumstances, each has its own heroes and villains. The consequences of ignorance can be both unexpected and catastrophic on different levels.

The book consists of two parts: *Ignorance in society* and *Consequences of ignorance*. The first one explores the approaches to studying ignorance and its general manifestations. The second is looking at ignorance in different spheres of human life. The overall outcome of the whole text is quite dialectical as it should be in the exploration of such a problem. It acknowledges the eternal cycle from ignorance to knowledge and new level of ignorance and knowledge showing how they are connected to each other, not through absence and presence, but through many more sophisticated ties and relationships.

The author definitely explores historical past and most of his narrative pertain to the pre-internet era. We have obviously become ignorant of much of this history and most probably have acquired a different level of ignorance with all this information and the tips of our fingers. The author does not address the tools created by society of making people more knowledgeable, except occasionally mentioning education and science as it is his aim to show how we become or stay ignorant. But much of the text would be interesting to information and library professionals as

they pertain directly to our experience and work. We have powerful tools that can be used both ways for spreading the knowledge and for concealing and hiding or at least inhibiting access to it.

The book is written by a widely educated person with great command of language and text. I liked the glossary of the terms related to ignorance at the end of the book. It helps to have an overview not only of the concept, but also of the author's take on it. The extensive bibliographic notes most probably will be omitted by most of lay readers, but they are a sign of serious scholarship that this text is based on.

Though Peter Burke is an emeritus professor of cultural history at the University of Cambridge, I am sure that his book on ignorance will attract wide audience not only of scholars but from general more or less educated public and make it aware of its own ignorance, not only that of others.

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