

Object *Agnotology*

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What is Agnotology?

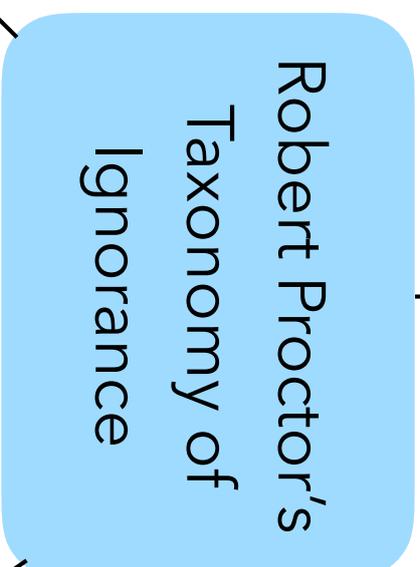
In the broadest sense, Agnotology is the study of **ignorance** and **uncertainty**

It comes from the Greek word **agnōsis**, or "not knowing"

What is Agnotology?

As Londa Schiebinger describes, Agnotology "serves as a **counterweight to traditional concerns for epistemology**, refocusing questions about "how we know" to include questions about what we do not know, and why not. Ignorance is often not merely the absence of knowledge but an outcome of cultural and political struggle.... What we know or do not know at any one time or place is **shaped by particular histories**, local and global priorities, institutional and disciplinary hierarchies, personal and professional myopia, and much else as well" (from "Feminist History of Colonial Science," 237).

Ignorance as
Passive Construct



Ignorance as
Native State

Ignorance as
Active Construct

Ignorance as Native State

Ignorance in this sense is "a primitive or native state is **something to be fought or overcome**; we hope and plan for it to disappear over time, as knowledge triumphs over foolish superstition" (4). It denotes a basically fatalistic relationship between ignorance and knowledge, where the latter naturally overcomes the former, as when an infant reaches out for language.

Ignorance as Passive Construct

Just as knowledge is constructed through academic labour and institutional support, ignorance in this sense is **cultivated through the absence of labour and support**. Here, what remains unknown is seen as the result of "ten thousand accidents (and deliberations) of social fortune" (6). We don't so much choose to be ignorant of something so much as we never specifically choose to know about it.

Ignorance as Active Construct

For Proctor, this form of ignorance is “something that is **made, maintained, and manipulated by means of certain arts and sciences**” (8). Here, we’re confronted with a conception of ignorance that is consciously being produced to hinder the production of knowledge, or cast doubt upon knowledge that already exists.

Agnotology as Method

- An archetypal case of agnotological methodology is Robert Proctor's 1995 book, *Cancer Wars: How Politics Shapes What We Know and Don't Know about Cancer*.
- Proctor traces the struggle between contending theories on carcinogenesis, institutional pressures to pursue cures rather than preventative measures, and the influence of the tobacco industry in hindering cancer research
- Proctor's work engages with **a wide range of dimensions** surrounding the disease: political, scientific, commercial and material concerns each contribute, in their own way, to the active and passive construction of uncertainty

Objects and Agnotology

While “Agnotology” is a relatively recent term, the kinds of phenomena it gestures toward have a fairly long history, especially when it comes to thinking about objects.

in the 18th century, Kant argues that the object as such (or *Ding an sich*) remain fundamentally uncognizable and all we really have access to are phenomena, or **encounters that leave us with contextually-dependant impressions.**

More recently, this project has been undertaken by theorists operating under the banner of **Object Oriented Ontology**, who, while critiquing some of the more anthropocentric impulses inherent from Kant, elaborate on the inherent weirdness of the relationship between objects, knowledge, and uncertainty.

Objects and Agnology

In this sense, all encounters with objects are perforated by uncertainty:

Ian Bogost: “**Only some portion of the domain of being is obvious to any given object at a particular time.** For the udon noodle, the being of the soup bowl does not intersect with the commercial transaction through which the noodle house sells it, or the social conventions according to which the eater slurps it. Yet there is no reason to believe that the entanglement in which the noodle finds itself is any less complex than the human who shapes, boils, vends, consumes, or digests it” (30).

How do we encounter the Canadian
Pavilion?

How do we map the uncertainty it
generates?

Group activity

In groups of 4 or 5, try and map out the different modes of encounter one could have with the Canadian Pavilion

Once you've found a few different modes, think about what questions each type of encounter might raise for you

The goal here is to think about how different types of encounter produce different types of uncertainty

Governance

Access

Labour

Scale

The
Canadian
Pavilion

History

The
nonhuman

What kind of encounter can you have with a building?

The Canadian Pavilion

The Nonhuman

In what ways will our
intervention impact the
nonhuman ecosystem
of the island?

History

Who's histories
aren't represented
in accounts of Expo
67?