

# Charles Mills - White Ignorance

In his text *White Ignorance*, Mills theorizes an understanding of **ignorance** that is inherently connected to the workings of **racial power dynamics and especially White normativity**. White normativity consists in the centering of experiences of white people and posits their perspective on the world as the only relevant (and only true?) perspective on the world, effectively diminishing the significance of the perspectives of non-white social groups.

"What I want to pin down, then, is the idea of an ignorance, a non-knowing that is not contingent, but in which race - white racism and/or white racial domination and their ramifications - plays a crucial role" (p. 20)

The idea of white ignorance does not correspond to every instance of a white person not knowing ("One would obviously need to distinguish what I am calling white ignorance from general patterns of ignorance prevalent among people who are white, but in whose doxastic states played no determining role). All people, including white people, are ignorant of a plurality of facts and subjects matters! White ignorance also is not a phenomenon that only white people can be affected by ("The 'white' in 'white ignorance' does not mean that it has to be confined *to* white people", p. 22). He is concerned with those instances in which a person, social group, or a whole population is **ignorant about an issue *precisely because of the structural workings of whiteness***. In a world structured by white normativity, everybody is thus affected by white ignorance, though not everybody is affected by it in the same ways.

In our previous classes we have encountered the concept of **epistemic resources** and have familiarized ourselves with the idea that the production of epistemic resources is directly **influenced by the power relations of epistemic agents**. Mills reminds us:

"For if the society is one structured by relations of domination and subordination (as of course most societies in human history have been), then in certain areas this conceptual apparatus is likely going to be shaped and inflected in various ways by the biases of the ruling group(s). So crucial concepts may well be misleading in their inner markup and their external relation to a larger doxastic architecture." (p. 25)

Because epistemic agents in more powerful social positions are able to **dictate and enforce the rules** of participation in epistemic practices, they are able to effectively **exclude** social groups from the processes of knowledge- and meaning-production. This leads not only to conceptual blind spots, but also to **gaps in our collective memories and histories**.

Consider Mills' example of the burning of records about the systematic oppression, exploitation and killing of the Congolese by the Belgians (cf. p. 29f.). The erasure of these actions **served the purposes of the white Belgian crown**: the powerful, victorious Belgians, by erasing records of their actions and crimes, **erased the ground on which** they could be held **accountable** and based on which their **claims to victory could be challenged**. This **produced ignorance**, together with a systematic prejudice against the testimony of the Congolese (and Black people more generally), serves the upholding of their power in the present.

"Millions of people had died, but we Belgians knew nothing about it" (p. 30, quoted after Hochschild 1998, p. 297).

**Racial power relations thus not only shape what we can know, but also determine what we cannot.**

Mills further works out that white normativity not only influences the things we know and can remember (or are ignorant about, for that matter). It also influences how we **perceive** and record the world in the first place. Consider Mills' remarks on European expansionism and colonialism:

"In the classical period of European expansionism, it then becomes possible to speak with no sense of absurdity of 'empty' lands that are actually teeming with millions of people, of 'discovering' countries whose inhabitants already exist, because the non-white other is so located in the guiding conceptual array that different rules apply. Even seemingly straightforward empirical perception will be affected - the myth of a nation of hunters in contradiction to widespread Native American agriculture that saved English colonists' lives, the myth of stateless savages in contradiction to forms of government which the white Founders arguably learned, the myth of a pristine wilderness in contradiction to a humanized landscape transformed by thousands years of labor" (p. 27).

It is a contested debate whether we can perceive without the use of concepts. It is undeniable that we can only **conceptualize, think, and talk about our perceptions** through the use of **concepts**. We can only see something *as red* or see someone *as human* or see a strip of landscape *as inhabited* through the use of the respective concepts of redness, the human, and our ideas of inhabited areas. The question thus becomes: How come the European explorers *failed* to acknowledge foreign humans, civilizations, and governments as such? How could their eyes record a human being and not recognize its humanity and extend ideas of human dignity and equality, which were widely theorized in the Early Modern period?

Mill's answer: **because they were not perceived as such**. They, white Europeans, didn't see a human, they saw a "savage". The idea of the savage then allowed a differential treatment of these *humanoid but not human* beings they encountered (cf. p.27).

He concludes:

"In all of these cases, the concept is driving the perception, with whites aprioristically intent on denying what is before them. So if Kant famously said that perceptions without concepts are blind, then here it is the blindness of the concept itself that is blocking the vision" (p. 27).

We learn that concepts drive our perceptions and that the formation of concepts is influenced by power relations, especially the workings of white supremacy and colonialism. The idea of the "savage" is **not about a proper and truthful description of the world**. As a concept, it would not have been needed if European colonialists had an intent on recognizing foreign peoples as equal to themselves. The idea of the "savage" was put in place, and continues to be upheld today, for the sake of **denying humanity and justifying social, political, economic and ecologic exploitation and domination**. Its use is "justified" not because of any truth about the world, but because of white colonial efforts.

As epistemologists, this should **deeply trouble** us: if power dynamics shape our understanding of the world, even all the way down to our understanding of truth (remember: only the story of the victor and his success apparently is worth preserving, as we learned earlier and as the saying "history is written by the victors" reminds us) - can we ever have such **a thing as a raceless, classless, genderless grasp on the Truth**? Can we

ever access the Truth in a "power-less" way, or: is there ever such a thing as a **Truth not informed by power?**

And further: is the idea of an innocuous, *powerless* truth, an idea established by white philosophers in Europe and North America, not an instance of **structural gaslighting**, serving to obscure the significance of power relations on not just how we think about the world, but also on how we perceive it in the first place?

Lives are at stake, in the past, the present, and the future. Our criticism of epistemic resources, hermeneutical injustice and white ignorance are thus always informed by a concern for justice and the preservation of human life - **where, then, does epistemology end and ethics begin?**