Ignorance is of increasing concern. The public discourse of anti-intellectualism poses ignorance as a positive alternative and antidote to elitism, and polls of the U.S. population, one of the most elite populations in the world, reveal alarming ignorance about world geography and history as well as current events. The problem is not explainable by a lack of access to resources for knowledge and information, nor is it a problem that decreases with the advantages of class. It is, or appears to be, a willful ignorance.

As this chapter will endeavor to demonstrate, the study and analysis of ignorance poses some special epistemological questions beyond the expected sociological and educational ones, questions having to do with how we understand the intersection between cognitive norms, structural privilege, and situated identities. Is the normative project of epistemology sufficiently well formulated to take up the challenge that a widespread and growing ignorance poses? Perhaps the pursuit of ever more fine-tuned reliable belief-forming practices should give way for work that explores the range of epistemically unreliable but socially functional belief-forming practices. Work in this area has already begun in feminist epistemology, social epistemology, sociological studies of the sciences, and also in the traditions of critical rationality in German social theory and other traditions, such as subaltern and postcolonial studies, that have developed critiques of dominant Western rationalities.

Even in mainstream epistemology, the topic of ignorance as a species of bad epistemic practice is not new, but what is new is the idea of explaining ignorance not as a feature of neglectful epistemic practice but as a substantive epistemic practice in itself. The idea of an epistemology of
ignorance attempts to explain and account for the fact that such substantive practices of ignorance—willful ignorance, for example, and socially acceptable but faulty justificatory practices—are structural. This is to say that there are identities and social locations and modes of belief formation, all produced by structural social conditions of a variety of sorts, that are in some cases epistemically disadvantaged or defective. Here, social epistemology intersects in a more intense way than usual with social and political theory.

In this chapter, I develop a typology of the recent arguments for epistemologies of ignorance and compare and contrast them. I then push the analysis of ignorance further by relating it to a previous generation’s discussion about structural ignorance, that is, from the work of Max Horkheimer and the Frankfurt School. Horkheimer’s analysis helps us see, I shall argue, that ignorance is a problem relating not just to justificatory practices but also to ontologies of truth.

Three broad arguments can be made for epistemologies of ignorance. The first, drawn mainly out of Lorraine Code’s work, is an argument that ignorance follows from the general fact of our situatedness as knowers. The second argument, drawn mainly from Sandra Harding’s work, relates ignorance to specific aspects of group identities. The third argument, drawn from Charles Mills’s work, develops a structural analysis of the ways in which oppressive systems produce ignorance as one of their effects. These three arguments are not by any means incompatible: one could develop an account that combined all three (and I suspect Code, Harding, and Mills would agree). But taken by themselves, each argument has different ideas about the nature of the problem of epistemic ignorance and the nature of possible solutions, as I shall try to show.

The idea of our general situatedness as knowers is developed best in the work of Lorraine Code, who famously and effectively argued against “S knows that p” epistemologies for mistakenly assuming that all S’s are fungible or interchangeable. Such epistemologies share the assumption that any person in an identical situation with identical access to perceptual data will form the same conclusions if she or he is performing epistemic operations in a responsible way. This assumption may work well for simple claims such as “The sun is shining” but cannot be generalized to more complex beliefs such as “Silvio is trustworthy,” or “The defendant is guilty,” or “The job applicant is well qualified.” These sorts of beliefs involve complicated processes of judgment that will bring the knower’s specific history of experience to bear. Given the nonfungible nature of knowers, then, Code argued that we need to develop a “geography of the
epistemic terrain . . . a population geography that develops qualitative analyses of subjective positions and identities and the sociopolitical structures that produce them. Because differing social positions generate variable constructions of reality and afford different perspectives on the world . . . these analyses derive from a recognition that knowers are always somewhere—and at once limited and enabled by the specificities of their locations’ (Code 1993, 39).

The fact that judgment is sometimes correlated to social position does not yield relativist conclusions, because judgments from any location must still be subject to challenge and verification. But it indicates that we should expand our account of how justification operates and hence our ability to develop more realistic ideas about how to provide normative checks on what are now considered best practices. Thus, as she succinctly put it, “objectivity requires taking subjectivity into account” (Code 1995, 44).

This argument works, then, from the epistemically substantive differences between situations to show that epistemic advantages and disadvantages are not the same for all. Some situations are in positions of ignorance, even though the knowers in those situations may have identical access to the relevant facts. For example, I may be attending an operation as a support person for the patient and have access to all of the same monitoring devices seen by the medical attendants, but my ability to understand the meaning of what the monitoring devices are reporting is not equal to trained professionals. I am not interchangeable with them as a knower in this context, and I am in fact ignorant in regard to some important elements required for judgment about the health and well-being of the patient. Code’s argument is simply that in many such instances some knowers are ignorant vis-à-vis others, just as a layperson in an operating room is clearly ignorant vis-à-vis the medical experts. Thus we need to do a qualitative analysis of the epistemic implications of various subject positions rather than assume that all S’s are epistemically equivalent.

The operating room case is a relatively uncontroversial example, but it can be used to indicate that an adequate conception of epistemic situation should include two claims. First, most knowledge is the product of judgment calls rather than deductive argument or simple perceptual reports. The doctors and I both have the necessary perceptual access to the monitoring equipment in the operating room, but an adequate judgment of the patient’s condition will require more than a simple reading off of numbers, given its dependence on an understanding of the patient’s current health and a knowledge and an acceptance of certain medical theories. Doctors’ medical expertise cannot be analogized to an increased ability (increased over my own) to read the data off the screen but involves more complex epistemic operations of judgment. Second,
any given individual who is called upon to make a judgment call will rely on her or his own specific experiences. These experiences are sometimes correlated to the individual’s social location or social identity, habits of perceptual attention, what Ian Hacking calls “styles of reasoning,” and also with the individual’s own interests—interests that are fluid and open to interpretation but that have some objective elements in regard to the conditions of the knower’s material reality. Thus an adequate concept of epistemic situatedness must involve much more than the knower’s position in time and space and must include individual factors about her or his history and experience. We recognize the variability in medical judgment when we accept the practice of “getting a second opinion”; this acknowledges the complexity of analysis required for diagnosis and treatment recommendations, and the fact that judgment is not reducible to algorithmic procedures.

Because it builds from a general condition of all knowers—that is, their situatedness—this kind of argument provides a general case about epistemic situatedness that potentially applies to every knower. We can summarize this argument by the following four premises:

1. All knowers are situated in time and space, with specific experiences, social locations, modes of perceptual practices and habits, styles of reasoning, and sets of interests that are fluid and open to interpretation but that have some objective elements in regard to the conditions of the knower’s material reality.
2. This specificity of situatedness is relevant, at least in some cases, to the ways that a knower will make judgment calls about issues of coherence, consistency, relevance, plausibility, and credibility.
3. From this it follows that knowers are not, in fact, fungible or interchangeable.
4. Further, it must also follow that knowers are not all “epistemically equal.” As Code said, knowers are at once limited and enabled by the specificities of their locations.

If we use this type of argument, then how would one develop the “geography of the epistemic terrain” for which Code calls? I suggest that from the fact of our general situatedness alone it follows that the epistemic implication of any given epistemic situation is determined by the context of the object of inquiry. That is, the fact that we are all situated does not give us reasons to classify any given situation as ignorant in and of itself; rather, a given epistemic situation may be advantaged or disadvantaged, depending on what kind of knowledge we are pursuing, or, in other words, in regard to a specific epistemic objective. As an untrained attendant at an operation, I am in a good position to know whether the
patient is still breathing; I am not in a good position to know whether the patient is in danger. Epistemic advantages and disadvantages do not accrue to social locations per se but only to locations as they exist in relation to specific kinds of inquiry.

Thus from the fact of our general situatedness it follows that ignorance should be understood as contextual, since it does not accrue to me simply as an individual outside of a particular situation. I may be a trained linguist with the ability to communicate in eight languages, or an excellent seamstress capable of making my own designs from scratch, but insofar as I am attending a medical operation, I am ignorant of the skills needed to fully assess the health of the patient. What is determinative of ignorance is the interplay between my individual epistemic situatedness—my location, experience, perceptual abilities, and so forth, not all of which will be relevant in any given case—and what is called for in reaching conclusions about this particular object of inquiry.

II

Next consider a different kind of argument for epistemic ignorance, one not focused on the general features of every epistemic situation but on the specific features of groups of knowers who share a social location. Sandra Harding has argued that the specific features of women’s epistemic situation vis-à-vis men give them an epistemic advantage. She gave eight grounds for the claim that by starting research from women’s lives, we can arrive at empirically and theoretically more adequate descriptions and explanations (Harding 1991, 119–33). These grounds build primarily from the systemic ways in which women’s lives differ from men’s lives: usually being alienated from social power, but rarely alienated from the everyday needs of maintaining material existence. Such arguments are not applicable if we imagine them globally, but they should be applied locally. That is, within given specific communities that share other features such as position in the global labor market, for example, or race, ethnicity, and nationality, the patterns that gender differences make generally play out in the ways that Harding and Dorothy Smith and other standpoint theorists have hypothesized. In other words, gender marks a reliable pattern of difference in experience within a culturally specific social group, because the substantive features that characterize any given gender identity will be dependent on cultural practices.

Particularly interesting for the topic of ignorance is Harding’s argument that “members of oppressed groups have fewer interests in ignorance about the social order and fewer reasons to invest in maintaining or justifying the status quo than do dominant groups” (1991, 126). Against this claim, one could argue that members of oppressed groups also have
specific reasons to maintain their own ignorance about the social order; for example, reasons based on the need to maintain civil relations with other people with whom they may have to work, to avoid the emotional distress of having to acknowledge the full weight of one’s oppression or the humiliation of one’s family members, and thus reasons that have to do with overall mental health and functional social relations. But such reasons to avoid thinking about social oppression may be outweighed by the need to know the true reality of the social conditions within which one must survive, the need to know who one’s potential allies and enemies are, for example. And those who are oppressed within a system are unlike those who benefit from it in having no need to make excuses for its rampant unfairness in order to avoid shame, guilt, or moral consternation. Thus I believe that Harding’s claim can be interpreted as the claim that, on balance, members of oppressed groups have fewer reasons to fool themselves about this being the best of all possible worlds, and have strong motivations to gain a clear-eyed assessment of their society.

Whether or not one agrees with this particular argument about the situation of the oppressed, one might still assent to the general idea here that social identities can confer motivations, or not, to develop a critical consciousness toward conventional beliefs and values. Such self-interested motivations can of course be overcome, as for example when the facts are too obvious to be ignored, but the point is that in some groups a given justified claim will encounter more obstacles to its fair assessment than in other groups, depending on the social identity of the individuals involved. Many of us who have taught philosophy classes in different kinds of institutions note a difference in how open various groups of students are to critical social theory, or critical race theory, or feminist theory, a difference that is often correlated to students’ social identities, albeit in complex ways.

Group identity, certainly as Harding makes the argument, does not confer justification in and of itself, so one might also wonder here whether the epistemic salience of group identity could be overcome by simply instituting good intellectual virtues. In other words, one might think that one should subject all new beliefs to the same rigorous demands for reasons, and if my group identity affects my willingness to do so in some cases then I am simply failing in my epistemic duties. The problem, then, would not be group identity but bad epistemic behavior.

To respond to this, we need to remember that belief formation generally involves judgment calls about relevance, plausibility, coherence, consistency, and credibility. What I already know and believe will have a privileged place in my judgments by affecting my determinations of coherence, consistency, and plausibility, and this is in fact good epistemic practice. Moreover, I cannot reasonably be expected to treat every one of
my beliefs as in need of rigorous scrutiny and independent verification; generally, it takes a crisis of some sort for a person to radically question one of her or his basic beliefs or belief sets. This crisis can be as mild as taking an introductory ethics course, or it can be as dramatic as being sent to war. Nevertheless, the law of entropy operates in the realm of belief: we tend toward conserving the beliefs we have until forced to call them into question. Again, this universal tendency is applied to very different sets of beliefs, given that we each start our mature epistemic lives with different sets of epistemic commitments depending on the accidents of our birth. Our judgment calls about coherence and plausibility depend in no small part on what happens to be in our core belief set. Thus the argument for the salience of group identity does not require one to hold that there are no universal epistemic practices, either “best practices” or simply human epistemic tendencies, but simply to hold that our universal tendencies are applied to different epistemic challenges depending, in part, on our group identity.

For example, I recount to a dinner party of academics that someone I know has been arrested and charged with a crime, and roughed up by the police, on trumped-up charges. I say that he was doing nothing to elicit this reaction from the police. I get two different sorts of responses, sympathy and skepticism. One group thinks “he must have done something” to elicit this reaction from the police, while another group nods knowingly, giving at least presumptive credibility to my story. Each group is weighing the plausibility of such a story based on its own knowledge and experience with the police and the criminal justice system. Each group may be performing at least minimally well by a standard of epistemic responsibility, but each comes to different conclusions. Such group differences, as this example illustrates, are often correlated to class and/or race differences. If my story had involved sexual harassment, sexual abuse, or domestic violence, then I might get a different set of responses in which gender played a larger role than class or race.

Group identity makes an epistemically relevant difference, then, not because identity alone can settle questions of justification, or because groups follow different procedures for justifying claims, but simply because groups will sometimes operate with different starting belief sets based on their social location and their group-related experiences, and these starting belief sets will inform their epistemic operations such as judging coherence and plausibility. Essentially, to acknowledge the occasional relevance of group identity on epistemic performance is no different than acknowledging such epistemically relevant differences as medical training or being positioned to be able to see an instrument panel.

The advantage that Harding claims for female gender identity follows from these kinds of considerations. Why is it important to have
women on the Supreme Court or in other law-making governmental bodies? Because the quality of the discussion about certain matters that only women are in a position to see the full weight of, such as the significance of pregnancy in a woman’s life, will be enriched. Her arguments could thus be used to suggest that women may raise new questions to consider in assessing legal judgments regarding pregnancy, for example, because they will operate from a different set of experiences that may affect how they judge plausibility on a variety of matters. Thus their critical orientation may be different and richer in regard to certain kinds of gender-related issues, richer in the sense of being based on more direct and comprehensive knowledge and experience.

In brief, then, we can summarize the argument for the specific relevance of group identity as follows:

1. The first premise repeats the first two parts of the general argument given earlier, that all knowers are situated, and that this situatedness has epistemic implications for knowers’ judgment at least some of the time.

2. The second premise holds that these situations are correlated in at least some important respects to social identity. (Such a claim does not require any biological or essentialist assumptions about the uniformity of identity but is entirely compatible with a theory about the historical and social construction of groups and of group identities.)

3. Specifically, the situation of having female gender identity has epistemically relevant aspects, including a general marginality from social power and a general lack of alienation from everyday materiality. Given the significant ways in which gender systems organize social life and child socialization, it would only make sense that part of what gender systems organize is going to be epistemically relevant to how knowers make judgments.

4. Because of its specific aspects, female-gendered location is a resource from which to build a feminist standpoint that can provide new critical questions for inquiry. This is not to say that the experience of this identity yields knowledge in and of itself, but that it contains resources from which new knowledges can be developed with critical and theoretical reflection, carried out both individually and collectively.

5. Male-gendered identity is, conversely, epistemically disadvantaged in its situatedness in regard to certain matters: it has less of an outsider perspective on dominant gender-related social scripts and forms of power and less of an overall interest in critically questioning them.
This argument makes an important addition to the earlier argument from the general situatedness of knowers, specifying the fact that epistemically situated knowers are correlated to group identity, and that specific group identities may confer epistemic advantages or disadvantages. It has the explanatory power to explain the significant differences, some would say significant improvement, in the production of academic knowledge that can be seen as a trend since at least the passage of the G.I. Bill, which began a process of democratizing the U.S. academy and making it accessible to some groups that were previously excluded. Since the 1950s various marginalized groups in U.S. society have been able to engage in academic inquiry in significant numbers, which has spurred the development of many new areas of research and paradigms of inquiry, including social history, ethnic studies, labor studies, and feminist philosophy. Would such new areas of inquiry and knowledge have developed in research departments that remained 95 percent white, male, and upper class?

In terms of developing a “geography of the epistemic terrain,” what follows most significantly from Harding’s approach is that epistemic advantages and disadvantages accrue to social and group identities per se rather than identities only in relation to a given context of inquiry. This is not to say that women or marginalized peoples will have absolute epistemic advantage in having more critical questions in regard to every conceivable line of inquiry, but that the pattern of epistemic positionality created by some identities has the potential for relevance in broad domains of inquiry, perhaps in any inquiry. Thus ignorance is contextual, but there are patterns of ignorance associated with social and group identities.

III

The third type of argument for epistemic ignorance provides an even more explicitly structural account of the nature of oppressive systems. While it shares a commitment to the general account of epistemic situatedness that comes from the two previously discussed arguments, the structural argument has some distinctive features.

The structural argument focuses not on generally differentiated experiences and interests, but on the specific knowing practices inculcated in a socially dominant group. Where the last argument argued that men, for example, have less interest in raising critical questions about male dominance, the structural argument argues that whites have a positive interest in “seeing the world wrongly,” to paraphrase Mills. Here ignorance is not primarily understood as a lack—a lack of motivation or experience as the result of social location—but as a substantive epistemic practice that differentiates the dominant group. As a member of a dominant social
group, I might indeed lack an interest in pursuing all of the ramifications of social injustice, or I might lack a marginalized experience from which to critique accepted social conventions. Thus my epistemic practices will be deficient vis-à-vis others because I lack something—motivations, experiences—that they have. However, the structural argument suggests that as a member of a dominant social group, I also may have inculcated a pattern of belief-forming practices that created the effect of systematic ignorance. I may be actively pursuing or supporting a distorted or an otherwise inaccurate account.

Mills writes, “. . . on matters related to race, the Racial Contract prescribes for its signatories an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made” (Mills 1997, 18). What might such “localized and global cognitive dysfunctions” be? To answer this question, we might imagine Archie Bunker or some suitable equivalent as the object of epistemological investigation, where the goal is to ascertain how he arrives at his conclusions with such confidence in their validity. If we can generalize from Archie, then we might conjecture that racism produces a pattern of perceptual attentiveness to the world that relegates some significant aspects of it to a murky nether region. Racism can also supply premises—and cast these as unchallengeable premises—that lead to judgments for which otherwise there is insufficient evidence. Thus racism is a type of subjectivity that forms patterns of perceptual attentiveness and supplies belief-influencing premises that result in a distorted or faulty account of reality.

Based on this, we can summarize the structural argument as follows:

1. One of the key features of oppressive societies is that they do not acknowledge themselves as oppressive. Therefore, in any given oppressive society, there is a dominant view about the general nature of the society that represents its particular forms of inequality and exploitation as basically just and fair, or at least the best of all possible worlds.
2. It is very likely, however, that this dominant representation of the unjust society as a just society will have countervailing evidence on a daily basis that is at least potentially visible to everyone in the society.
3. Therefore, cognitive norms of assessment will have to be maintained that allow for this countervailing evidence to be regularly dismissed so that the dominant view can be held stable.
Again, this argument can be differentiated from the previous arguments in that it contends that there exist substantive cognitive norms to explain ignorance rather than merely the absence of certain kinds of experience or motivations. It has the explanatory power to explain why it is that most whites in the United States seem to believe that the United States is a form of society based mostly on individual merit, while most nonwhites seem to believe that the United States is a form of society based on a racial contract. The problem that we often encounter is not simply that there is a pattern of difference in doxastic commitment, but that it is very difficult to reach consensus even after extensive discussions, for example, in classrooms.

Mills suggests that “whiteness,” which he carefully defines as a political construct rather than simply an ethnic category, brings with it a “cognitive model that precludes self-transparency and genuine understanding of all social realities,” that it ensures that whites will live in a “racial fantasyland, [or] a ‘consensual hallucination,’” and that the root of all this is the “cognitive and moral economy psychically required for conquest, colonization, and enslavement” (Mills 1997, 18–19). If it is true that most people prefer to think of themselves as moral or at least excusable in their actions, then in unjust societies those in dominant and privileged positions must be able to construct representations of themselves and others to support a fantasyland of moral approbation. Thus such whites might believe that the academy is a meritocracy, that modernity began in Europe and then spread outward, and that global poverty is disconnected from Western wealth. The persistence of such myths in spite of increasing empirical and theoretical counterevidence certainly suggests that the cognitive dysfunctions responsible for myth maintenance are more than a matter of differences in group experiences or expertise. However, Mills’s claims about the existence of a white cognitive dysfunction need more explanation, and I will argue in the following section that Horkheimer’s critique of the ontologies of Western science can help us fill out the story.

First let me summarize the typologies of ignorance I have developed here by comparing the geography of the epistemic terrain suggested by these three types of arguments for ignorance. The idea of a general epistemic situatedness developed in the first argument renders ignorance contextually dependent on the particular configuration—that is, the fit—between knower and known. The idea that group identity yields variable epistemic dispositions renders ignorance the result of an underprivileged set of experiences and motivations, so to speak. Finally, the idea of a cognitive model to ensure distortions of reality renders ignorance an effect of inculcated practices common to a group. There is a contextualism built into this latter scenario: for Mills, the cognitive dysfunctions associated
with whiteness concern issues relevant to racism, not any and every possible area of belief. We can further combine the second and third arguments to reveal an especially troubling result: not only are whites inculcated in some pernicious epistemic practices, but they will have less motivation or ability than others would have to either detect their errors or correct them.

Now there are numerous questions here that invite further analysis. In regard to motivations to critique existing social relations, we clearly need to address the class, ethnicity, and gender heterogeneity among whites, for example, and to think through the relationship between the objective interests of colonialism generally and the objective interests of whites as a group. We would need to consider how a multiplicity of identity alignments might produce conflicting effects on belief formation. If members of dominant groups are responsible for essentially duping themselves about the true nature of their social world, then are there resources in their own experiences from which to draw out the truth? Much more needs to be asked about the susceptibility of nondominant groups to various misrepresentations of reality. These are essentially questions of social psychology, but the structural argument that Mills develops shows that social psychology as well as political analysis will have epistemic implications on real-world practices of justification.

Noting the ways in which cognitive situatedness can be correlated to group identity cannot lead to a replacement of epistemic considerations for identity considerations. The point remains that the problem is in the cognitive norm, not in the identity per se, and so we need to focus on isolating and identifying these dysfunctional norms and understanding how they operate. The remainder of this chapter, then, will focus on a further understanding of such norms.

IV

The Frankfurt School’s critique of instrumental rationality will prove especially helpful here, since its project was to do a materialist critical analysis of reason under conditions of capitalism and fascism, where strategic goals of productivity and efficiency circumscribed the practices of reasoning activity. Thus, like Mills, the Frankfurt School made links between the kinds of knowing practices that exist in contemporary society and macro structures of political economy. In effect, it portrays instrumental rationality as a kind of a dysfunctional cognitive norm, functional within very narrow parameters of capital accumulation and the maintenance of ideology but dysfunctional as a reliable, truth-seeking practice. This claim about the dysfunctional status of instrumental rationality later became one of the central issues of disagreement between Habermas, on one side,
Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance

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