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Dynamics of wilful blindness: An introduction

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Abstract

What are the politics of ignorance in an age of misinformation? How can the concept of 'wilful blindness' help us to understand the logics involved? We start the introduction to this special issue by arguing that the intrinsic instability of wilful blindness draws valuable attention to the graded nature of intentionality and perception, and the tensions between them. These features are an essential part of the workings of ignorance, as we illustrate with reference to the shifting intentions of drug couriers, the fleeting moments in which the humanity of victims is recognised in the midst of violent acts, and the affects that channel economic behaviour, such as in the subprime mortgage crisis. When approaching perception and intentionality as complexly entangled in institutionalised fields of power, 'wilful blindness' emerges as a powerful and critical diagnostic of the epistemic instabilities of our time.

Keywords

affect, agnotology, denial, intentionality, political economy of non-knowledge, recognition, strategic ignorance, transparency

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To be wilfully blind means shutting out uncomfortable information. When taken literally, the concept negates itself. If truly 'willed' then the blindness is more artificial than real; if truly 'blind' then surely it cannot be wilful. Why, then, should anthropologists adopt the notion of wilful blindness? What analytical possibilities does the concept afford? And what dynamics does it capture that related notions such as 'strategic ignorance', 'false consciousness', or 'denial' do not? This special issue is based on the premise that the antagonistic relationship between the concept's two constitutive terms makes wilful blindness analytically productive. Focusing on this inherent dynamism allows us to probe into the relationship between knowledge and practice, intention and recognition, and to analyse how internal contradictions are dealt with in interpersonal and institutional contexts. Our analytic development of the concept thus centres on its intrinsic instability.

In criminal law, wilful blindness refers to 'the deliberate avoidance of knowledge of the facts'; that is, a person avoids gaining knowledge as a means of avoiding self-incrimination.[1] In common usage, however, the term 'wilful blindness' evokes a much broader spectrum of phenomena, behaviours and mental states. People might be 'turning a blind eye' to institutional racism in the police force; or be 'putting their head in the sand' about unsustainable family debt; they might be 'denying a reality' about their own health; be 'selectively aware' about the environmental impact of individual life-choices; 'consciously avoid' knowledge of the working conditions in the factories where their clothes are produced; or 'suspend disbelief' when faced with 'convenient fictions' about a Brexit in which you could have your cake and eat it. Phrases such as 'the ostrich complex' or 'an open secret' similarly evoke the idea that people are able to see or know about uncomfortable truths, but find a way of blinding themselves to them.

Wilful blindness can imply both strategic (non-)perception and normalised disposition. Our goal is not to develop a static definition or typology of wilful blindness. Instead, we highlight how the term captures the tension between perception and blindness, and between internalisation and deliberation. Wilful blindness speaks directly to how forms of domination become naturalised and embodied, as well as describing more calculated and strategic forms of ignorance. The strength of the concept lies in its ability to capture both conscious and unconscious forms of ignorance, as well as the myriad slippages in between. Wilful blindness must therefore be understood as inhabiting a spectrum where deliberate unawareness is at one end of the spectrum, and normalised blindness or unconscious disregard on the other. Rather than seeing manifestations of wilful blindness as fixed in a specific location of this spectrum, we direct attention to the shifting back and forth along gradations of knowledge and non-knowledge, awareness, perception and deliberation. Key questions, therefore, are: What animates movement across the spectrum? What are the social dynamics that shape the unstable relationship between wilfulness and blindness?

The articles in this special issue examine wilful blindness in the context of financial servicing, consultancy, resource extraction, climate change, scientific knowledge production, and statelessness. Through these different ethnographic

explorations, wilful blindness emerges as a diagnostic of the contradictions and epistemic instabilities of the human condition. While the individual contributions to this special issue explore how wilful blindness is produced in specific political and economic contexts, this introductory article makes the case for sharpening up the concept by focusing on three key dynamics. First, we explore the role of intention and its assumed relationship with agency, concentrating particularly on the fluidity of intentionality and awareness. The second focus is on the vicissitudes of perception via a discussion of the workings of recognition. The third key dynamic we explore is the power of conviction and affect in determining what will be seen and what will be known, paying attention to how shared emotions fuel the ways in which groups or individuals slice up reality and make it in/visible. Finally, we point out how the fluctuations of wilfulness and blindness are constrained and enabled by political and economic conditions. Before focusing on these key dynamics, the introduction takes a brief look at some of the assumptions implicit in the emerging anthropological literature on the politics and productivity of ignorance.

The politics and productivity of ignorance

The last decade has seen an upsurge in anthropological studies of ignorance, with Mair et al. (2012: 3–4) stating most explicitly the need for 'seeing ignorance as an ethnographic object' and thereby establishing 'the ethnography of ignorance' as a field of inquiry. This involves seeing ignorance not as a residual category, but as an active product of epistemic techniques (Kirsch and Dilley, 2015). As Bovensiepen argues (2020, this issue), anthropological studies of ignorance tend to emphasise one of two aspects: either how ignorance can be used strategically as a tool for wielding political power, or they stress the generative and socially productive dimensions of ignorance, embedded within existing cultural practice.

Scholars focusing on the use of ignorance in larger power plays, highlight ignorance as symbolic capital (Gershon and Raj, 2000), as a form of governmentality (Mathews, 2005), or as a defining feature of bureaucracy (Graeber, 2015a). Ignorance is shown to be used as a tool of governance by being produced in others (Kirsch and Dilley, 2015: 19; Mair et al., 2012: 15), for example by devaluing or refusing to recognise the knowledge of specific groups or populations (Vitebsky, 1993). This approach shares some base assumptions with approaches developed by scholars working on the sociology of knowledge and science and technology studies. Thus, Proctor coined the term 'agnotology' to examine how governments or corporations employ ignorance and doubt strategically, for example by insisting on keeping the question of the human contribution to global warming 'open' (Proctor, 2008: 15). Along similar lines, the deployment of 'strategic ignorance' in bureaucratic institutions (McGoey, 2007) is understood to facilitate the expansion of institutional power (Best, 2012: 100), while the British government's intentional manufacture of ignorance and uncertainty about death tolls in the Iraq War has been shown to serve as a means of deflecting political criticism (Rappert, 2012: 43–4). As in the examples mentioned, much of this

literature sees ignorance as collective, strategic and rational fabrications.[2] The associated assumption is that institutions are able to coordinate their activities, are motivated by the pursuit of an overall long-term goal and driven by logic and reason, rather than context or affect.

The other main strand in the anthropology of ignorance centres on the 'productivity of ignorance' (Mair et al., 2012: 15) and its 'social effects' (Kirsch and Dilley, 2015: 20). Analyses of 'the creative aspects of absent knowledge' (Højer, 2009: 575; Pedersen, 2017) focus less on powerful institutions, governments or corporations, and more on ordinary citizens and the religious or social dynamics that shape their lives. Professing to be ignorant of their ancestral religion, for example, can empower Sarawak Christians (in Malaysian Borneo) to avoid obligations towards demanding spirits (Chua, 2009). Ignorance can be a strategy for maintaining peaceful relationships or avoiding conflicts (Bovensiepen, 2014: 66–7; High, 2015); secretiveness can have generative social and political effects (Kirsch, 2015; Pelkmans and Machold, 2011). In contrast to the 'political critique' literature, studies examining the social effects of ignorance rarely import assumptions about autonomous rational actors and instead focus on socio-cultural contexts within which ignorance is produced and embedded.

The two strands we identified in the anthropological literature on ignorance differ with regard to how they conceptualise the relationship between intention and social action. In philosophy such issues are discussed as questions about the relationship between consciousness and the world, the inner self and human behaviour. In his analysis of speech acts, the analytical philosopher John Searle (1983), for example, maintained that a person's intention is what makes action meaningful (Duranti, 2015: 11–19). This argument has been criticised by anthropologists for assuming that speakers are 'autonomous selves', whose actions would be based on individual intention, not constrained by social expectations and relationships (Rosaldo, 1982: 204). Indeed, many anthropologists have emphasised the mutual constitution of self and the world (e.g. Bourdieu, 1977; Ortner, 1984), proposing that ignorance itself might be seen as 'praxis' (Anand, 2015: 309).

The anthropology of ignorance tends to ascribe deliberate action to governments or corporations, while the non-knowledge of non-state actors tends to be examined as embodied praxis or to be understood within specific social and historical contexts. By seeing different forms of wilful blindness as existing on a spectrum – with strategic ignorance on one extreme and ignorance as embodied disposition on the other – we seek to avoid taking an approach that differentiates according to the object of study. Adopting a graded notion of intentionality (Duranti, 2015: 39) also helps us to make sense of why some societies underplay intention in favour of an emphasis on the pragmatic effects of human action (Robbins and Rumsey, 2008). However, rather than mapping societies onto an intentionality continuum, we argue that intentionality is itself unstable, and that this instability shapes the dynamics of wilful blindness in individuals, institutions and groups.

Intention as process

In criminal law, where the term originates, wilful blindness is established if the accused is aware of the (probable) existence of a fact, but has deliberately avoided obtaining 'positive knowledge' in order to avoid culpability (Robbins, 1990: 196).[3] Particularly instructive are cases related to narcotics prosecution in the United States, such as the prominent 1976 United States versus Jewell case. In this court case, Mr Jewell claimed ignorance about the 110 pounds of marihuana that were stashed in a secret compartment of the car he was driving north across the Mexican–US border, a trip he agreed to make in return for a substantial sum of money. The court ruled that this was a case of 'wilful blindness', here referring to an 'actor who is aware of the probable existence of a material fact but does not satisfy himself that it does not in fact exist'. The court ruled that Mr. Jewell's ignorance was deliberate, and that 'deliberate ignorance and positive knowledge are equally culpable'.[4]

The United States versus Jewell case is interesting not just because it offers a legal definition of wilful blindness, but also because it reveals the difficulty of defining 'knowledge' and 'knowing'. The majority opinion states that 'to act "knowingly" ... is not necessarily to act only with positive knowledge, but also to act with an awareness of the high probability of the existence of the fact in question'.[5] For the judges, however, acknowledging such gradations of knowledge did not translate into an equally graded notion of intentionality. Rather, the opinion describes the appellant as having acted with 'conscious purpose', someone who acted 'voluntarily and intentionally' rather than 'by accident or mistake', and indeed 'consciously avoids' gaining positive knowledge.[6] In doing so the legal opinion reveals two things: first, that the modern legal system – necessarily – sees actors as autonomous and rational individuals; second, it assumes a direct and straightforwardly causal link between intention and action. In other words, the Western legal system is intentionalist.

We obviously cannot reconstruct the role of material and emotive factors in Mr Jewell's conduct, and to what extend it was premeditated. But it is worth pointing out that the literature on drug mules shows that intentionality in such cases is often unstable and shifting. It might hence be better understood *as a process*, which 'does not imply that actors have definite goals consciously held in mind during the course of their activities' (Giddens, 1979: 56 in Duranti, 2015: 21). Fleetwood's (2014) work on female cocaine traders, for example, shows that their involvement was motivated by love and money, and that decisions were often haphazard, without full view of what was to come. As one woman remembered her thinking when offered $10,000 for making a trip: 'Yeah. Why not? Nothing to lose' (Fleetwood, 2014: 114). Despite a discourse of free will among drug dealers, the structural conditions pushing them towards certain choices lay heavily on them (Bourgois, 1996). Law can only deal with these material, affective, and situational factors as secondary, mitigating circumstances. For us, by contrast, the complex social and

political entanglements within which wilful blindness is constituted are crucial in shaping the fluctuations of awareness and intention.

Acknowledging that intentionality is processual, constituted in practical engagement with the world, and informed by affective and material contingencies, obviously does not mean that we should be so naïve as to ignore the possibility of premeditated blindness. *Strategic* ignorance is often an essential element of political projects. It may include the manipulation of data or self-closure from incriminating information, to avoid culpability or to advance economic and political agendas. However, those agendas do not necessarily need to be fully conscious. The articles in this collection suggest that even when there is strategic meditation among some actors, these strategic deployments of ignorance are nested within more habitual forms of wilful blindness. Dinah Rajak's (2020) article on wilful blindness in oil companies is emblematic in this regard. She focuses on sustainability managers who 'want a future for our grandchildren too', but end up accepting a 'reality' as defined by short-term market forces. Here, blindness refers to mechanisms that constrict fields of vision, thereby leaving the larger issues of pollution and climate change unseen, and their causes unchallenged. Similarly, Peluso's (2020) study of 'Chinese Walls' in investment banks, which are key to avoiding conflicts of interest, illustrates that strategic ignorance can be more intuitive than cognitive. She shows how the analysts and investors have developed a sensitivity that allows them to 'know' what is happening, even without seeing or hearing the actual information – wilful blindness becomes an embodied disposition.

Intention clearly cannot be considered separate from degrees of perception. To briefly return to United States versus Jewell, this point was implicitly acknowledged in the dissenting opinion. Although agreeing that Mr. Jewell was culpable of driving a car with a hidden stash of marihuana, it didn't see how he could be guilty of the intent to distribute: 'It is difficult to explain that a defendant can specifically intend to distribute a substance unless he knows that he possesses it.'[7]

Perception and recognition

We might want to approach wilful blindness by considering its counterpoints. In development and governance circles, the term 'transparency' was once a buzzword, thought to produce a field of clear vision and accountability. However, transparency projects often generate new forms of opaqueness and invisibility. This is so because complete visibility is usually unattainable, meaning that transparency projects can only push the limits of the visible a bit further, and tend to do so by channelling vision in particular directions (Alexander, 2012; Barry, 2013; Pelkmans, 2009; Sanders and West, 2003). If not transparency, what, then, constitutes the antithesis of wilful blindness? We would like to propose that recognition captures the kind of social dynamics that run counter to wilful blindness. Let us illustrate this through an example.

The 2007 documentary *To See if I Am Smiling* (directed by Tamar Yarom, 2007) focuses on seven female Israeli soldiers. One of the women describes her first operation at the age of 20 in the occupied Palestinian territories. A Palestinian settlement had been bombed, and residents were running out of their houses. The soldier and her team were charged with trying to contain the chaos. She was given a club by her superior and told to 'go out and start hitting'. Suddenly, amidst the chaos, the soldier heard the cry of a child. She turned around and wanted to pick up the Palestinian child. 'It was so instinctive' she said, 'to hug him, to calm him down.' 'Then his mother came out and looked at me, with such hatred in her eyes', she continued, 'And at that moment, I realised exactly who I was and how she saw me.' This scene illustrates the double movement involved in the process of recognition. The soldier's internal response to the sound of a crying child leads her to recognise the personhood of those she was ordered to contain. Yet, this unexpected perspectival inversion also made her realise how the Palestinian woman might see her. She was suddenly able to look at herself, through the eyes of the other.

The concept of recognition is helpful in examining the optics of power, because it pushes us to consider that 'blindness' and 'visibility' are layered, involving not only a physical but also a social dimension. As Honneth and Margalit (2001: 113) put it, social visibility is more than just cognising (*Erkennen*); it entails recognising (*Anerkennen*) which in the case of seeing a person implies perception of their properties and of 'the character of the relationship'. It is recognition of others 'as the subject of a morally practical reason' that Immanuel Kant (1996: 557) identified as one of the foundational blocks for any moral society. In the example above, it was the spontaneous moment of identification with a protester that momentarily shattered the mind-set in which she was merely 'following instructions'. She did not just see the other, she recognised her as a social and moral person.

Denying the personhood of others requires effort, as studies of violence and killing have repeatedly shown. Christopher Browning's (1992) analysis of Reserve Police Battalion 101, a killing unit of 500 men in Nazi Germany, most of whom were middle-aged policemen from the Hamburg region, is emblematic in this regard. Based on an analysis of 125 testimonies, Browning demonstrates how the social mechanisms of obedience to authority and peer pressure turned the vast majority of these 'ordinary men' into effective killers. But they were not killers to begin with. The description of these men's first assignment (to kill the vast majority of the 1800 Jewish inhabitants of the village of Jósefów) is particularly revealing. Major Wilhelm Trapp had given the order with 'choking voice and tears in his eyes', and while only a dozen men publicly backed out of the assignment, many others found ways to 'slip off' or, in the words of one, 'had become so sick that I simply couldn't any more' after his first kill (Browning, 1992: 1–2, 66–7).

The point is that the task of killing initially highlights the full humanity of the victim. Indeed, the suddenness of the task and the rather patchy ideologisation, meant that most killers could not help but see their targets *as persons*. However, the description also reveals that mechanisms to produce blindness immediately

started to kick in. The rationalising narratives of obedience to a larger power, placing responsibility onto higher authorities, dehumanising the victims, and an ideology of duty towards the group made killing bearable.[8] Sheer repetition further contributed to a numbing of the senses: 'Like much else, killing was something one could get used to' (Browning, 1992: 85). Within months, these 'ordinary men had become efficient, untroubled killers of helpless civilians' (Clendinnen, 1999: 131).[9]

Systematic mass killing involves wilfully ignoring the full humanity of the victims and this requires concerted effort that can be achieved via a number of key mechanisms. While we do not wish to equate the wilful blindness described by contributors to this special issue to that of genocidal killings, some of the mechanisms via which recognition can be averted are similar. In her discussion of undocumented children in Malaysia, Allerton (2020, this issue) shows how the state discourse of deservingness leads to the denigration of 'foreign' children as a drain on resources and to a failure to recognise them as worthy of moral respect. Placing responsibility on 'higher authorities' is a key mechanism via which this can be achieved. Kirsch's article (2020, this issue) shows that how we define knowledge can itself shape our vision. Analysing the rationalisations of a prominent environmental sociologist who consulted for Exxon after the *Valdez* oil spill, Kirsch shows how a commitment to 'scientific objectivity' left this sociologist blind to the larger ethical, personal and political responsibilities, which is how he ended up abetting the interests of big oil, at the expense of communities affected by pollution.

Affective (non-)knowledge

People have a tendency to deny, dismiss, divert, or displace information that disrupts their efforts to create coherent and liveable worlds (Rayner, 2012). As we saw in previous sections, drug mules dismissed thoughts about potential negative consequences when embracing short-term gains, while killers denied the humanity of the victim or the implications of their actions to preserve a sense of their own humanity. These tendencies have strong emotive qualities. We discuss the affective dimension of wilful blindness via a final example, the 2007/8 subprime mortgage scandal.

In his study of debt advisers in the UK, Davey (2017: 10) shows that the bulk of their work with low-income clients consists of identifying all debts and payment requirements, details of which their clients were often unaware or had ignored. This was partly due to the obscure language of financial and legal contracts, but also because the confrontation with payment requirements is emotionally upsetting. This particular articulation of wilful blindness gained public visibility in the subprime mortgage crisis. Overconfidence in the continued rise of the housing market, the positive connotations of mortgages in contrast to most other debts (see Killick, 2011), and far-reaching deregulation of mortgage provision created a toxic mixture for many borrowers. Indeed, the stigma attached to defaulting on one's mortgage meant that those affected tended to hide their crisis from others, as

well as from themselves, with negative financial and mental health consequences (Keene et al., 2015).

This interplay between interests, emotions and blindness was not restricted to debtors; it equally affected lenders and regulators. During the subprime mortgage boom most actors were aware of some of the risks, but they downplayed these, imagined themselves to be exempt and/or abstained from connecting the dots. Thus, while certain mortgage providers described their own products as 'suicide mortgages', they did not anticipate the crisis to spread beyond affected borrowers. Mid-level managers in mortgage securitisation continued to invest their own resources – in fact increasing their exposure during the boom – literally buying into their own optimistic economic theories (Cheng et al., 2014: 2799). Alan Greenspan, then chair of the Federal Reserve of the United States, claims to have been aware of the risks of relaxing the regulations on subprime lending, but considered this necessary to widen the political support basis for property rights, seen as an essential pillar of the market economy (Killick, 2011: 360).

The side-lining of risk and the continuation of overly optimistic assessments of the housing market, even when indicators increasingly point in the opposite direction, is attributable to a combination of confirmation bias, group-think and cognitive dissonance. Confirmation bias refers to the tendency to lend more credence to information that confirms already held beliefs, particularly so when such confirmation intersects with personal interests of a material or emotive nature (Nickerson, 1998). These tendencies can be amplified in group settings. Cheng et al. (2014: 2827) highlight that job environments in the finance industry fostered group-think and over-optimism. Pointing in the same direction, Tuckett documents the circulation of 'dangerously exciting stories' among senior finance managers in the run-up to the financial crisis, and 'strange group processes in which realistic thinking is fundamentally disturbed', so that normal caution about risk-taking was ignored and alternative views were dismissed (Tuckett, 2011: x, xv). Excitement, uncertainty and anxiety were key in shaping the decisions of financial traders, as was the desire to coordinate feelings with the rest of the group, which he calls 'group feel' (Tuckett, 2011: xii).

The affective dimensions of wilful blindness also clearly emerge throughout the articles in this special issue. In Timor-Leste's emerging oil industry, for example, wilful blindness gains traction from the emotive force garnered by the discourse on resource nationalism and resistance against foreign occupation (Bovensiepen, 2020, this issue). This allows East Timorese oil company employees to move in and out of awareness about the potential failure and negative side-effects of oil infrastructure development. These kind of 'conviction narratives' (Tuckett and Nikolic, 2017) influence people's disposition towards various kinds of information – as becomes clear in Felix Stein's (2020, this issue) discussion of blindness in a consultancy firm. Rhetoric, pragmatism and strong assumptions allow management consultants to compartmentalise awareness in a way that is beneficial to the aim of maximising profit.

These examples demonstrate that knowledge is affectively mediated, but also that these affects are socially constituted, and obtain their concrete features in group dynamics. When the sociologist Donald Mackenzie (2011) characterised the credit crisis as 'a problem in the sociology of knowledge', he highlighted that asset-backed securities and collateralised debt obligation were too technical to be understood by many, which prevented problems being detected and fed back to the system. We would like to add that even when problems were detected, the emotional costs of such information prevented it from circulating. Indeed, evidence shows that regulators were increasingly aware of the risks to the system, but because of convenience, because they wished it away, or because they feared the consequences, they decided not to act. These reflections on how the circulation of knowledge is affectively mediated, and how ignorance resonates through social networks, link directly to the next and final section.

Wilful blindness as a concept of critique

The articles in this special issue all pay attention to selective perception of those in positions of relative power, from the rationalisations by environment-minded employees working for oil companies (Rajak), to the deliberations of academics and private sector analysts engaged in consultancy work (Stein; Kirsch). 'Blindness' can become institutionalised to render stateless children invisible (Allerton), to uphold the fiction of financial integrity (Peluso) or to finance expensive oil infrastructure unlikely to serve local communities (Bovensiepen). The contributions illustrate that wilful blindness is rarely a product of either deliberation or emotion alone, but usually involves complex and unstable processes of activating and deactivating certain reflections and feelings. Taken together, these articles thus demonstrate how the biases and blind spots of individuals become entrenched as they link up with economic and political structures. They also, and importantly, demonstrate the affective and epistemic underpinnings of our political economy.

As we asked at the beginning, why should anthropologists adopt the notion of wilful blindness? And is it not an overly judgemental concept? Unlike hegemony, which focuses on the ideological constructs that are evoked to reproduce dominance and authority over others, the concept of wilful blindness in this collection focuses on the stories those in power tell themselves to legitimise their actions towards themselves. This does not mean that wilful blindness does not exist among ordinary people or non-elites. As we have hinted throughout this introduction, a dose of wilful blindness is surely a vital part of everyday life (Heffernan, 2011: 23). We all need to blind ourselves to some of our own flaws, contradictions and hypocrisies. Wilful blindness is equally essential to the establishment and maintenance of meaningful relationships – a way of avoiding conflict. However, for a number of reasons the concept of wilful blindness is a particularly helpful concept when studying elite discourse and action.

First, the concept is both critical and empathetic. It pays attention to the subtleness of people's own accounts, while also acknowledging the social, political and

economic consequences of selective awareness. In other words, it combines a critical analysis of the structural conditions in which wilful blindness is embedded with a focus on personal or individual experience – without prioritising one over the other. Second, highlighting the fundamental contradiction of the two constituent terms – wilfulness and blindness – we are able to dissolve the opposition between strategic intention and naturalised disposition, which is often projected onto elites and non-elites respectively. As the articles in this special issue show, deliberate blindness can be institutionalised in a way that it becomes a naturalised disposition; awareness can slip in and out of focus, which makes it hard to determine specific degrees of intentionality in social in/action. Third, the notion of wilful blindness allows us to examine the interplay of cognitive and affective processes. These are not only relevant when determining what can or cannot be seen, but also in deciding the very rules of defining what constitutes objects of knowledge and collective or personal responsibility. By combining the anthropology of ignorance with a critical discussion of intention, perception and affect, we highlight the dynamic and unstable processes involved in the politics of ignorance.

These discussions of the role of intention and perception in social action resonate with much older debates, such as that of 'false consciousness'. Karl Marx's analysis of the social conditions of alienation under capitalism is similarly based on scepticism towards intentionality. False consciousness suggests that individuals might not understand or control their intentions because the material conditions they find themselves in obscure perceptions of reality. Enlightenment offered a remedy for those who in Marx's words 'do not know it, but they do it' (Marx,1976 [1867]). Yet, authors such as Peter Sloterdijk counter the naïve idealism of the concept of 'false consciousness' with a respectful pessimism more attuned to the proliferation of cynical reasoning, in which people 'know what they are doing, but they do it [anyway]', often out of self-preservation (Sloterdijk, 1988: 5; see also Žižek, 1989: 25).

However, both Sloterdijk's and Marx's positions assume that the world can be divided into true and false facts and that reality can be known fully by those participating in it. Notions like false consciousness therefore seem judgemental to post-truth critics because it is not seen to take people's own explanations seriously. However, like the concept of false consciousness, which is only judgemental if one assumes there is such a thing as 'true consciousness', wilful blindness is only judgemental if one assumes there is ever 'complete vision'. If we accept that all visions, including those of the analyst, are limited, blurred or refracted in different ways, wilful blindness becomes a highly productive concept. To say that all awareness or knowledge of reality is limited and subjective does not imply a rejection of reality – only an acknowledgement that it cannot be fully or definitively known (Graeber, 2015b).

This brings us to the final point: notably, the importance of combining an analysis of the social production of ignorance with an analysis of the unstable fields through which ignorance travels, and the importance of analysing its effects. After all, 'Underlying all intended interactions of human beings is their unintended

interdependence' (Elias, 1969: 143). Although not addressing (lack of) knowledge as such, Norbert Elias' statement contains an important reminder for discussions of ignorance. Put simply, in chains of information transmission, the wilful blindness of some will produce genuine blindness in those further down the line. The relevant point is that intentionality and awareness are unevenly distributed in interrelated social fields. Part of the challenge posed by the concept of wilful blindness is to examine how political and economic conditions are able to stabilise and institutionalise some forms of wilful blindness and how, despite the fluctuation of intention, ignorance and awareness are entangled with complex power relations. Given the often detrimental effects of wilful blindness, this is something we cannot afford to close our eyes to.

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Notes

1. 56 Fed. Reg. 57974, 57976 (November 15, 1991); citing United States v Jewell, 532 F.2d at 697, 700 (9th Cir. 1976).
2. Graeber's (2015a: 38) work is an exception here, since he stresses how bureaucratic institutions – rather than acting rationally – merely use the discourse of 'rationality' as a way of hiding their true values.

3. The term 'wilful blindness' was first used by English authorities in 1861 in response to a defendant's plea of not having known that the goods that he appropriated had belonged to the government. The implication was that if the authorities could establish that the defendant was *wilfully* ignorant, he would be guilty of a criminal offence (Robbins, 1990: 196).
4. United States v Jewell, 532 F.2d at 697, 700 (9th Cir. 1976), available at https://h2o.law.harvard.edu/collages/17709
5. United States v Jewell, 532 F.2d at 697, 700 (9th Cir. 1976).
6. United States v Jewell, 532 F.2d at 697, 699–700 (9th Cir. 1976).
7. United States v Jewell, 532 F.2d at 697, 705–706 (9th Cir. 1976).
8. For elaborate discussions of the mechanisms of 'denial', 'desensitisation' or 'blindness' of perpetrators of violence, see Stanley Cohen's chapter 'Accounting for atrocities' (2001: 76–116), Alexander Hinton's article 'Why did you kill?' (1998) and Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men* (1992).
9. In line with this Grossman (1995: 13) has written that 'the history of warfare can be seen as a history of increasingly more effective mechanisms for enabling and conditioning men to overcome their innate resistance to killing their fellow human beings'. He finds that while a small percentage of recruits kill easily, most must be trained to do so.

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