



The Power of Secret Knowledge: The RAND Corporation, Ignorance Studies and Sociology

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Abstract

The following contribution is concerned with the relation of Dayé's work on the RAND Corporation during the Cold War and the field of ignorance studies. In doing so, I aim to emphasise the interconnection of three central themes that pervade Dayé's work: secrecy, ignorance, and power. In an era of Cold War insecurity, marked by strategic attempts by both sides to obscure their own capabilities, a largely secretive organization emerged as a reliable source of knowledge, helping to guide decision-making in uncertain times and to generate policy recommendations. This not only raises significant questions about the power of certain groups or individuals to define what counts as policy-guiding knowledge, it also points to a form of ignorance that is highly productive. It not only affords the creation of new knowledge practices, but it becomes a force in itself that mobilizes the creation of further ignorance. While these connections are implicit in Dayé's work, this study seeks to bring them to the forefront and to explore them in dialogue with classical sociological literature and in the context of seminal contributions to the field of ignorance studies. In order to do so, I will start with a brief elaboration on the secrecy that surrounded the work conducted at the RAND corporation, alongside a brief discussion of the notion of secrecy and elite power in the canon of classical literature in sociology, to then introduce the field of ignorance studies. From this angle, I will explore how a particular form of ignorance lies at the core of the workings at RAND and how ignorance studies might help to better understand the developing influence and rule of experts.

Keywords Ignorance Studies · RAND · Cold War · Prognosis

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Secrecy at the Center

Amidst heightened tensions between the western and the eastern bloc during the times of the Cold War, both the United States and the Soviet Union wanted to keep the details of their nuclear weapons program secret in order to maintain a strategic advantage over their counterpart and other potential adversaries. Thus, in the aftermath of World War II, secrecy became a central hallmark and was considered vital for the protection of the American national security. Furthermore, in the context of the heightened concerns about national security during the Cold War, secrecy and classification of research and knowledge became a central characteristic of scientific practices. One think tank that emerged in this time was the RAND corporation, which is an acronym of Research ANd Development: In 1946, 10 million dollars were provided for the establishment of Project RAND, settled in a secret contract between the Air Force and the Douglas Aircraft Company. Two years later, the RAND corporation was founded with the task to conduct research and analysis on a wide range of issues related to national security and the development of military technology for the United States Armed Forces. It has, as we know now, a history of working on classified projects for the U.S. government, particularly during the Cold War period, and can be characterized by a culture of secrecy within the organization. Right from the beginning of RAND, as Brodie remarks, “secrecy played a key role in the formation, identity, and work conducted” (Brodie, 2011: 647). Much of what happened in this time was not known to the general public and yet had great influence on the country’s foreign policy and positioning in global geopolitics. Among those who played a central role in the work conducted at RAND were, besides scientists from various disciplinary backgrounds, social scientists, who took up a particular role in that they served as the basis for a new form of expertise. The defeat and containment of Communism as a matter of national survival led, as Rohde writes, “most social scientists” to accept “military-funded research as legitimate social science” (Rohde, 2009: 99). Financed by federal funding, social scientists themselves thus embraced and played a central role in performing the culture of secrecy. Today, much more is known about the workings and inner dynamics of this and similar think tanks and organisations, in which Dayé’s work plays a central role.

The topics of power and elites is a central area of interest for sociologists. Published in 1956, Charles Wright Mills’ *The Power Elite*, for instance, describes a small, interconnected group of leaders “composed of economic, political, as well as military, men” (Mills 2000a: 224) who wield disproportionate powers and inhabit positions from which they can make decisions with major consequences. The ordinary citizen is portrayed by Mills as being in stark contrast to those powerful groups, as they remain relatively powerless and susceptible to manipulation. Some years later, in his 1959 book *The Sociological Imagination*, Mills describes how part of sociology “turned to the use of corporation, army, and state” (Mills 2000b: 92) and that new institutions, such as industrial relations centres, research branches of corporations, air force and government have arisen to connect social scientists “in fact and in fantasy, with the top levels of society [...] and with generals having sizeable budgets” (Mills 2000b: 95). In those changing circumstances, “social scientists have come into professional relations with private and public powers well above the level

of the welfare agency and the country agent” Mills 2000b: 95p). Dayé’s work on the RAND corporation thus explicates this changing role of social scientists during the times of the Cold War in a way that speaks in interesting ways to such major work in sociology. Another central aspect that Dayé puts forth is that of secrecy, which has, at least since Georg Simmel, been of great interest for sociologists. First published in 1906, *The Secret and the Secret Society* puts forth an understanding of secrecy as the positive or negative concealment of reality, even more so, he sees it as “one of the greatest accomplishments of humanity” (Simmel, 1906: 462). Whereas Simmel conceived of the secret mainly as a social relation between individuals, as one that has a social life and shapes social relationships, secrets held by states and governments are intrinsically bound up with power, a differentiation that bears particular relevance when it comes to the practices of concealment found in organisations like RAND. The history of RAND thus displays close connections to various classical and contemporary work in sociology, work that highlights the interrelations between power and secrecy. Another disciplinary angle that combines those two can be found in the field of the sociology of ignorance, or ignorance studies, an orientation that can help to better understand and uncover the underlying dynamics under which prognoses at RAND unfold.

Studying What is Not Known

Not only notions, such as power and secrecy have been pervasive in context of the American Cold War, also the notion of ‘strategic’ has been endowed with government and military meanings. Published in 1969, Erving Goffman’s *Strategic Interaction* was not only written in the context of Cold War tensions, it was, as Jaworski (2022) writes, also influenced by his specific experiences as a graduate student at the University of Chicago, which had faculty members, who had served in intelligence organizations during World War II. From 1952 to 1953, Goffman served one of them, Edward A. Shils, as a research assistant and had attended classes with others who had knowledge of espionage. This gave Goffman ample opportunity to learn about the topic. In his work, he describes ‘strategic interaction’ as situations where “[t]wo or more parties [...] find themselves in a well-structured situation of mutual impingement where each party must make a move and where every possible move carries fateful implications for all of the parties”. In those situations, “each player must influence his own decision by his knowing that the other players are likely to try to dope out his decision in advance and may even appreciate that he knows this is likely”. Under these conditions, actions need to be pursued in “the light of one’s thoughts about the others’ thoughts about oneself” (Goffman, 1986: 100p).

The Cold War was thus a large-scale situation of strategic interaction, which not only involved trying to gain a strategic advantage in coming to knowledge about the other bloc’s potential moves, but at the same time, aiming to conceal those knowledge practices, indicating a double movement of strategic creation and concealment of knowledge. This speaks two both, traditional accounts in the sociology of knowledge and the social studies of ignorance (for an overview, see Gross and McGoey, 2015, 2022): While much of sociological work traditionally engaged with the social condi-

tions underlying the creation and distribution of knowledge, for some decades now, sociologists have increasingly pointed to the importance of the unknown as an object of sociological analysis in its own right. The emerging and cross-disciplinary field of ignorance studies turns this on its head, exploring the conditions underlying the creation and distribution of ignorance. Within the field of ignorance studies, different terms and concepts are thereby developed to “denote that there can be knowledge about what is not known” (Gross, 2007: 247). A central reference in the literature is the already introduced Georg Simmel, placing human’s existence fundamentally on the “boundary between knowledge and nonknowledge” (Simmel in: Gross, 2012: 5), referring to the acknowledgement of limits and borders of knowledge for planning and action. Adding the dimension of power, recent work in the field of ignorance studies (see McGoey, 2019), as I will expand in more detail throughout this essay, asks the question as to who are the groups and individuals endowed with the power to define those very boundaries between knowledge and ignorance.

An early articulation of the interest that bounds this field together was the introduction of the term “agnotology” (Proctor & Schiebinger, 2008), designating a reversal of the notion of epistemology. Whereas epistemological questions are concerned with understanding the conditions of the production of knowledge, agnotological questions seek to understand the conditions under which non-knowledge and ignorance is being produced. The narrative presented by Dayé is thus not only about governmental endeavours to produce foreknowledge in order to gain strategic and political advantage; while this is certainly the case, it is also about “specific practices and routines of dealing with what is not known” (Wehling, 2006: 95).

One way of dealing with uncertainty is offered by statistics and probability calculus. Statistical extrapolation offers sets of regulations to rationalise uncertainty, allowing for statements about the likelihood that an event will occur. Central for the development of statistics is the calculus of probability, which development Ian Hacking (1990) has termed “The Taming of Chance”. Probability calculus provides the basis to make choices in situations of uncertainty, aiming at maximising the areas in which one has some control over the outcome, while minimising the areas in which one has no control over. During the times of the cold war, those techniques to rationalise uncertainty were, however, limited or not available. What set the techniques developed at RAND apart from such practices was that due to the scarcity of data and the unprecedented situation, statistical extrapolation “was deemed inadequate both with regard to scientific-technological advances and to social and cultural processes” (Dayé, 2020: 6). It was especially, as Dayé writes in drawing on Ghamari-Tabrizi, the “existential fact of the bomb [that] altered time significantly and permanently” (Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2012: 269). Even more, the strategic construction of ignorance in relation to the nuclear bomb added an additional layer of ignorance. Under these conditions, another way of rationalising uncertainty was due: At RAND, knowledge about the future was gained in tapping into the explicit and implicit knowledge of experts from the field of the social sciences. Through this technique, they defined, so to speak, what came about as trustworthy and untrustworthy knowledge about future states of the world, something about which one can, in principle, have no certain knowledge. Sociological research on the cold war in general and the RAND corporation in particular can profit from this perspective, in that it helps to shed light on the

particular constellation of knowledge practices, as developed by RAND during the cold war period.

For some time now, the term ignorance has become more and more used to encompass a range of ways in which we can think about what we don't know. A central theme hereby is the (conscious) manufacturing of ignorance to protect corporate or political interests (see also: Oreskes and Conway, 2010), a theme that can also be linked to knowledge practices in Cold War America. Ignorance, so one of the central claims, can, just like knowledge, be a source of power and advancement, rather than a weakness or vulnerability. Even more, ignorance can become a powerful and productive force that brings about new forms of ignorance and secrecy.

Productive Ignorance: A Cold War Rationality

In post-war America, during the times of the cold war, secrecy about one's own capabilities and one's knowledge about the enemy's capabilities and intentions was a central characteristic. During this time, both sides, the United States and the Soviet Union, were "attempting to occlude its capabilities and to deceive the other side into assuming the worst" (Dayé, 2020: 2), a social practice that can be grasped through the lenses of the concept of "strategic ignorance" as developed by sociologist Lindsey McGoey. By this, McGoey describes the "mobilization of the unknowns in a situation in order to command resources, deny liability in the aftermath of disaster, and to assert expert control in the face of both foreseeable unpredictable outcomes" (McGoey, 2012: 555).

The ability to create and maintain ignorance and secrecy on the other side about one's own capabilities was seen as a form of power; a situation that, in turn, afforded the creation and cultivation of different forms of knowledge. This interplay can be seen as a strategic interaction with the aim of gaining a strategic advantage. In the context of RAND, this dynamic facilitated the creation and cultivation of various forms of knowledge. Unlike other forms of secrecy, the practices of secrecy at RAND were distinctive in that ignorance itself became a productive force. This occurred through two distinct mechanisms. Firstly, secrecy served as a catalyst for the development of new epistemic practices that aimed to generate knowledge about phenomena that were not fully understood. Secondly, secrecy and ignorance about the capabilities of others led to the creation and mobilization of new forms of concealment and secrecy. Essentially, the mobilization of unknowns regarding political and military strategies prompted research into ways of countering those gaps, while simultaneously keeping those practices hidden from the other block.

In developing and experimenting with various approaches, the epistemological problem of technical ignorance about the other's abilities were rendered less problematic. The programmatic at RAND was as such: While we cannot have certain knowledge about the future and the other's strategies, we know from whom we can reasonably expect to have some. Experts were identified as a group of people in possession of valuable knowledge; researchers at RAND thus sought to find ways of how to access and harvest this knowledge.

What was needed was a technique to tap into and to cultivate expert knowledge, in which context, two techniques to gain knowledge about the future were developed at RAND: the Delphi method, which seeks to obtain a consensus view among experts, and political gaming, both developed with the aim of generating (fore)knowledge based on expert opinion. In *Experts, Social Scientists, and Techniques of Prognosis in Cold War America*, Dayé (2020) provides us with detailed insights into the development of this new form of knowledge that hinges on a methodologically controlled way of tapping into the knowledge and opinions of experts.

The first method to do so involves soliciting and synthesizing expert opinion on topics such as the occurrence of future events. This is achieved by asking a group of experts to formulate predictions on particular issues, which are then averaged and presented to the experts again in an iterative process until a consensus is reached. The second method involves organizing experts into groups that represent national governments to simulate a political or military crisis and to use the resulting decisions to update the simulation's game state. The aim was to anticipate the next step of the political enemy to gain strategic advantage.

These two techniques developed at RAND were thus to pool the opinions of experts in order to sketch possible futures. What is crucial is that through an iterative process, a state of prognostic stability should be reached, giving those expert claims additional epistemological strength. One can, so to speak, use expert claims as a way to come to knowledge about what was not known. One might say that the strategic production of ignorance and uncertainty, especially in regard to the nuclear bomb, led to the development and application of different techniques of knowledge creation, through which, besides others, the RAND Corporation cultivated the hope that experts can serve as a source for general reason and rational knowledge about the future.

Experts and the Lure of Epistocracy

One of Dayé's assertions at the beginning of the book is that it is a "common human reaction to ignorance and insecurity to endow large and potentially unjustified amounts of trust in selected social or cultural positions and their proponents" (Dayé, 2020: 3), something that resonates with the given assumptions behind the concept of strategic ignorance. At RAND, strategic ignorance led to the development of a particular form of knowledge, in which experts became part of epistemological thinking. In this context, knowledge about the future was no longer generated through prognosis, defined as future claims without empirical or evidential backing, but through forecasts, which differ in that they involve a systematic evaluation of available data by experts (Dayé, 2020: 150). To bring those two strands of research together, one might say that the strategically produced ignorance about the atomic bomb helped the expert "to climb up the ladder of cultural relevance" and to enter "the court of power" (Dayé, 2020: 3). When studying the historical and epistemological characteristics of the expert in this context, one can identify particular moments in history in which the expert occupied the role as a mediator between knowledge and power.

What aroused my interest was to learn that the techniques developed at RAND were inspired by the advancements in sampling and election forecasting throughout the 1930 and 1940 s (Dayé, 2020: 42p). What polling and the Delphi method have in common is the conviction that there is a way to tap into the implicit knowledge or opinions of a group of people. While for early pioneers in polling, such as Archibald Crossley, this was allegedly seen as “the long-sought key to ‘Government by the people’” (Crossley, 1937: 35), for the RAND researchers, it meant the government of the expert. Whereas pollsters use the opinions of their interviewees as a basis for prediction, at RAND, it is the interviewees themselves who make predictions. This reverses the position of power from interviewees as a resource for epistemic claims to interviewees as epistemic and political agents in their own right. This of course raises the crucial point of whether it is possible to provide expertise to guide policy decisions while upholding democratic procedures, pointing to the tension between democratic values and governmental practices. The history of RAND during the Cold War era thus highlights the challenges of balancing the need for expertise in guiding policy decisions with the need to maintain the integrity of democratic institutions and the autonomy of social science research.

In this sense, experts thus became the locus of knowledge creation. Even more, the epistemological assumption, as put forth by philosophers Helmer and Rescher (1959), who worked at RAND, was that expert opinions can, given certain circumstances, be viewed as empirical evidence. The approaches of knowledge creation developed at RAND thus facilitated the rule of the knower, coming with the epistemic hope that those knowers “could help society cope with the omnipresent insecurity” (Dayé, 2020: 220) and to produce good policy. In this sense, social scientists became the most appropriate authorities, whose opinions served as a source of knowledge that helps to navigate in times of ignorance. Experts at RAND were thus endowed with trust and monopolized what McGoey coined as oracular power, “the ability to create or impose a consensus on where the boundary between the known and the unknown lies” (McGoey, 2019: 69). Even more, the trust in their abilities to do so was rendered vital for the preservation of civilization and to defeat the spread of communism. As a consequence of this, by relying on experts to inform U.S. foreign policy, the general public was to a great extent excluded from political participation, describing the tenets of epistocracy, a form of government in which decision-making power is given to individuals or groups based on their knowledge or expertise in a specific field or area. In other words, it is a system guided by the belief that certain experts are better equipped to determine the best course of action than the (ignorant) electorate. Those who are deemed to have the most knowledge or expertise in a particular area have the most influence in making decisions related to that area.

Conclusion

Looking at the history of RAND through the perspective offered by ignorance studies, a field Dayé does not engage with in his work on the RAND corporation, sheds new light on the rationality and logic behind its development and influence. As per Dayé’s narrative, during the Cold War, knowledge and ignorance entered into a par-

ticular constellation with each other: The opposing blocs were engaged in a constant situation of “strategic interaction” (Goffman, 1986), struggling for strategic advantage. In this context, it was recognized that the opposing block was actively seeking to obscure their capabilities, thereby necessitating the cultivation of alternative forms of knowledge for the purpose of gaining a strategic advantage. Knowledge about the strategic construction of (technical) ignorance on one side, in turn, necessitated the parallel construction of (fore)knowledge on the other side. Both forms of knowledge were deliberately kept hidden in order to maintain the element of surprise and to prevent the opposing block from gaining an upper hand.

Throughout this short essay, I aimed to emphasise that in the context of the RAND Corporation and the Cold War, the ability to define the boundaries between knowledge and ignorance held significant strategic and (geo)political implications. In an era marked by efforts to both produce and obscure knowledge, the experts at RAND emerged as a crucial source of knowledge, fostering forms of governance centred on expertise and excluding the public from political participation.

In uncertain times, finding democratic and transparent ways of governance remains crucial, but recognizing the complexity of ignorance can deepen our understanding of its role in social processes. What seems particularly important from a sociological perspective is the investigation of what had to be mobilised in order to create secrecy and ignorance in times of the cold war, but on the other hand also the question of what the secret as a productive force in itself mobilised. As we have seen in the discussion of RAND’s Cold War social scientists, both blocs strategically created knowledge and ignorance in relation to political and military programs. However, the practices at RAND stood out from other forms of purposively created ignorance, such as the protection of business secrets. Whilst, as we have seen, the assembling of secrecy produced a division between knowers and not-knowers, an intuitive effect of practices of secrecy, it also led to the production of secrecy on their counterparts, secrecy became a driver of various social processes. What I hope to have shown is that the reality that was concealed at RAND took on a life of its own, reinforcing secrecy and fuelling a competition between countries to gain the upper hand by obtaining more secret information about their enemies. During the cold war, secrecy became a powerful force that drove the production of foreknowledge in response to strategically imposed ignorance, a dynamic that fuelled the construction of ignorance about the very knowledge being produced.

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