



## Agnocracy: Rule by Ignorance

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### Abstract

Around the world today, there is a building wave of calculated and relentless untruth and non-knowledge, which has become a common governing principle. This article coins the term agnocracy (rule by ignorance) for this phenomenon, urging attention to it as a distinct form of governance. It offers a qualitative and conceptual analysis of agnocracy, based on historical and contemporary evidence, taking inspiration from the field of agnotology or the construction and manipulation of non-knowledge. Based on this approach and the available evidence, it identifies the recurring tactics of contemporary agnocracy, before illustrating the point with examples from contemporary Russia, China, India, Hungary, and the United States. Finally, it points the way toward the study of agnocracy by considering the present-day epistemological, cultural, and practical factors that make non-knowledge attractive and effective.



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### Introduction

In Plato's ideal republic (Book 3, section 389B-C), rulers are permitted to lie to enemies and citizens alike, although citizens are not free to deceive rulers. Political theorists through the ages have recognized and often applauded official dishonesty, from Machiavelli who advised princes to be shrewd and cunning and to use words to veil truth, to Hannah Arendt (1971) who grasped that "Truthfulness has never been counted among the political virtues, and lies have always been regarded as justifiable tools in political dealings." Understandably then, she was surprised "how little attention has been paid" to political mendacity.

Only recently have scholars like Aradau and Perret become cognizant of the importance and pervasiveness of "governing through non-knowledge," attributable to the "emergent interdisciplinary field of ignorance studies" (2022, p. 405). At last, "uncertainty, ignorance, unpredictability, ambiguity, or opacity" come into view "as techniques of governing" (p. 406). Still, the practice of governing through non-knowledge lacks a name; accordingly, the present essay proposes the term *agnocracy* (*a*, no/without + *gnosis*, knowledge + *kratos*, rule) and offers a preliminary exploration. It is somewhat stunning, in the current political environment, that the word has word has not already been coined, yet

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a Google search at the time of writing (spring 2025) yielded exactly zero hits.

The neologism is consistent with the aforementioned field of ignorance studies, which does have a name—agnotology. *Agnotology*, as formulated by Smithson (1989) and especially Proctor and Schiebinger (2008), stresses that ignorance—which is not equated with stupidity—is not a simple deficit of knowledge but is often a socially constructed state of not-knowing, frequently intentionally and maliciously; furthermore, ignorance or not-knowing is a diverse outcome of diverse processes. Agnocracy is not to be confused to *anocracy*, a prevailing term for a regime that mixes democratic and autocratic features, resulting in inherent instability and ineffectiveness; however, it is not hard to see the affinity between the two—that agnocracy contributes to anocracy and that anocracies endorse agnocracy.

The following discussion, given its focus and its scope, will not emphasize international politics (since it is easy to appreciate why a government would want to keep its rivals and enemies ignorant); it will also not linger on so-called “voter ignorance,” except insofar as the ignorance of voters is a product of agnocracy. Therefore, the discussion here investigates how governments rule by fomenting non-knowledge, among citizens and, more often than we acknowledge, among leaders, officials, and agencies themselves. We will see that agnocracy is the great dynamic—and bane—of contemporary political culture. We will also see how agnocracy relates to Nietzsche’s critique of truth and Baudrillard’s identification of simulacra as significant sociopolitical realities.

### Materials and Methods

The present paper offers a qualitative analysis of the proposed concept of agnocracy. It draws on evidence from historical sources as well as contemporary politics, both in scholarly discussions and in the news and media. It is inspired in part by the field of agnotology, the obviously allied study of non-knowledge and its often deliberate construction. In conjunction with agnotology, it first extracts common tactics of ignorance-making or agnomancy and identifies their cognates in contemporary politics. It then explores actual contemporary agnocrats or leaders who indulge in agnocracy, illustrating the points with real-world political examples.

### Tactics of Agnocracy

Michael Smithson may be the progenitor of ignorance studies (he did not use the term agnotology). In his 1989 *Ignorance and Uncertainty: Emerging Paradigms*, he argued that ignorance or not-knowing is both neglected and misunderstood, the latter because it is ordinarily construed as mere absence of knowledge; as soon as people acquire information, in the standard model, they cease to be ignorant. However, he found that ignorance is more complex, consisting first of irrelevance and error. Irrelevance further consists of untopicality, taboo, and undecidability, while error encompasses distortion (including confusion and inaccuracy) and incompleteness (including absence and uncertainty, broken down into ambiguity, probability, and vagueness). Almost two decades later, Robert Proctor and Londa Schiebinger popularized “agnotology” in a volume by that title, which results from various ignorance-generating activities, which we will call—and describe briefly—as agnomancy or the “conjuring” or construction of not-knowing.

Significantly, most of the cases in Proctor and Schiebinger’s volume, as in other contributions to the field like David Michael’s 2008 *Doubt is Their Product: How Industry’s Assault on Science Threatens Your Health*, Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner’s 2002 *Deceit and Denial: The Deadly Politics of Industrial Pollution*, and Linsey McGoey’s 2019 *The Unknowers: How Strategic Ignorance Rules the World*, attend to agnomancy by corporations, which stand to protect profits by keeping consumers, regulators, and often themselves uninformed. Considerably less examination has been aimed at governments and political figures, although the same basic processes obtain.

Probably the first and most universal—and most excusable—agnocratic strategy is secrecy. Carnegie defines secrecy as “intentional concealment of information from one or more audiences,” specifically other countries, the domestic public, and “market actors” (2021, p. 213-4). For valid (though sometimes exaggerated) security reasons, governments commonly keep their military and other capacities secret from rival/enemy leaders. We should also distinguish keeping secrets from other governments and keeping secrets with them, the latter including secret negotiations and treaties such as Franklin Roosevelt’s agreements with Stalin

at Yalta. Most analysts judge keeping secrets from the state's own public as more problematic, although often justifiable: ordinary citizens should arguably not know how to build a nuclear weapon.

Carnegie adds that secrecy avails itself of various tactics, "from a simple lack of transparency" to robust methods of "encryption, classification, or penalties for sharing information." She further distinguishes between open secrets ("where the facts are known but not openly acknowledged"), quasi-secrecy (official secrecy mitigated by "leaks" and "selective disclosure"), obfuscation, and outright deception (p. 214). There are multiple reasons for domestic secrecy, for instance "to enact unpopular policies, prevent escalation, reach bargains, send signals, and avoid destabilization" (p. 214); of course, politicians prefer to keep their own crimes and immoralities secret, from Nixon's Watergate break-in to Clinton's Oval Office affair. In such instances, secrecy takes the form of cover-up.

More prosaically, information is hidden from sight by classification and encryption. Two decades ago, Galison highlighted the frenzy of classification and its levels of "confidential," "secret," and "top secret." In 2001 alone, he estimated 33 million classification actions covering over 330 million pages; from 1978 to 2004, the total may have reached 8 billion pages (2004, p. 230). The National Declassification Center recently announced that more than two million pages were declassified in just two months (August/September 2023). All of this secrecy requires a vast human and logistical apparatus, which Melley dubbed "the covert sphere," a maze of office-holders, agencies, and bureaucracies with "its own laws (NSC memorandums, secret authorization directives, covert rules of engagement), and its own territories (remote airstrips, Guantánamo Bay, rendition sites)" (2012, p. 5).

Encryption is almost as old as state politics itself, reaching back perhaps 4,000 years. In its various guises, it entails coding information in such a way that readers can only understand it if they possess the key or cipher to decode it. Ancient Greeks and Romans created cipher codes, including Julius Caesar's method of substituting letters in messages. Cryptography became more sophisticated in the early modern era, and a mechanical encoding device was invented in the mid-1800s. Coding and code-

cracking were essential to twentieth-century war efforts, and inevitably encryption has become more powerful and more crucial in the digital age. In 2020 the U.S. Department of Commerce issued guidelines for federal encryption standards (Barker 2020).

Secrecy is only the most overt version of clandestine operation. Another expansive set of practices could be collectively labeled silence; again, this entails both maintaining silence among officials and silencing the public. Silence begins with censorship, blocking access to certain knowledge; classically, censorship targets words, statements, and images deemed immoral or socially unhealthy (especially "pornography"), but increasingly it captures facts and news that challenge regimes. Governments may ban books or block internet access, at least to specific sites. More whimsically but disturbingly, a new report describes how China prohibits references in user text chat within the video game "Marvel Rivals" to terms like "free Hong Kong," "Uyghur camps," "Taiwan is a country," or "Tiananmen Square"; "America is a dictatorship" is allowed but not "China is a dictatorship" (Lopez 2025). More selective silencing entails redaction, the removal or blacking-out of particular words or sections of a document; an otherwise public document thus creates gaps in knowledge.

One effective technique of government self-silencing is failure or refusal to collect information in the first place. Leaders may instruct agencies, especially overseeing controversial matters including health or the environment, not to gather data on the subjects; governments can subsequently plead legitimate ignorance of any negative facts or outcomes. Alternatively, once data is collected, agency heads may withhold it or delete it from sources like government websites. (In the U.S., individuals hostile to the mission of agencies and departments have been appointed to head them.) A further method of official or collective silence, and therefore public ignorance, is erasure, such as excluding various facts from history or science textbooks.

Beyond silencing itself, a regime may silence others, including experts and the general public. One possible device, more common in business than government, is non-disclosure agreements, which forbid individuals from sharing what they know. More sinister and dangerous are verbal and financial

(and sometimes physical) assaults against experts such as scientists, academics, and whistleblowers. Regimes may attempt to discredit them (for instance, accuse them of bias or personal agendas), withdraw their funding, fire them, or even jail them. Other near-universal victims of silencing are journalists and the press; agnomancers and agnocrats hate a free press, whose sworn job is to investigate and expose corruption and abuse. Around the world, newspapers have been attacked and closed and journalists muzzled, threatened, intimidated, arrested, and killed. According to the International Federation of Journalists (2024), 122 journalists and media workers were killed in 2024 (half in Palestine), with many others injured or imprisoned.

More subtle is the practice of epistemic injustice or discounting the knowledge and perspectives of specific segments of society, such as women, the poor, or ethnic, racial, and religious minorities. According to Fricker, epistemic injustice entails both “testimonial injustice” in which the credibility of speakers is disparaged and “hermeneutical injustice” in which subalterns are disadvantaged in “making sense of their social experiences” due to deprivations of knowledge (2007, p. 1). Finally, citizens silence themselves and each other by huddling inside information silos and epistemic bunkers, the latter defined by Furman as “social epistemic structures” that “boost the credibility of testimony from internal actors and diminish the credibility of those outside, sometimes blocking external testimony entirely” (2022, p. 3), thereby inoculating members from invasive knowledge.

Yet another suite of agnocratic schemes could be categorized as evasion, designed to avoid giving accurate or complete information. The simplest is refusing to answer a question as asked, frequently by changing the subject or offering an irrelevant answer. Politicians are especially renowned for speaking in platitudes or indulging in “politician speak” or weasel words, in which they utter a lot of words but do not actually say anything clear or substantial. Evasion is often accompanied by distraction, presented in words or actions that shift attention away from looming information gaps.

We cannot neglect the battery of practices that fall under the general heading of information operations or “actions taken by organized actors

(governments or non-state actors) to distort domestic or foreign political sentiment, most frequently to achieve a strategic and/or geopolitical outcome” (Weedon, Nuland, and Stamos 2017, p. 4). Among the best known is disinformation, “inaccurate or manipulated information content that is spread intentionally,” which may take the modern form of fake news (p. 8). When the government controls the media, information operations against the domestic population are easy and virtually inevitable; even without proper control, a regime can pump propaganda into the culture. Another way to manipulate audiences is by fearmongering, which makes them susceptible to some messages and resistant to others. A comparatively benign but important method is spin, which seeks to alter the interpretation or perception of facts and events. Finally, a country’s people cannot but perceive through the prism of political myths, the often quite emotionally charged narratives and symbols of its past and its nature. The foreword to Flood’s study of political myths called them “ideology cast in the form of history” (2002, p. xi), and Flood made the cogent observation that “convinced adherents of ideologies show a remarkable ability to ignore, deny, or reinterpret information which is incompatible with tenets of their belief system” (p. 20).

Last but hardly least is outright lying. Knowing an inconvenient or incriminating truth, officials may merely replace truth with lies; in the case of what Kellner named brazen lies, such as George W. Bush’s dishonesty about Iraq, the speaker lies knowing that the media and some citizens know the statements are lies, “hoping to get away with it” (2007, p. 135). More-or-less brazen lies may be accomplished by or appended with fakes, frauds, and forgeries, such as faked documents and doctored photos; one of the most infamous fakes is *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. A twist on lying is denial, in which a government spokesperson asserts that some fact is in fact not true.

### **The Age of Agnocracy: Non-Knowledge in Contemporary Politics**

Two things should be clear but bear articulating. First, most of the foregoing agnomancy strategies have been available for centuries or millennia, at least in some form; technology enables some and introduces a few more, but the basics of agnomancy have long been known and practiced. Second,

governments and politicians hardly monopolize the field of agnocracy: corporations have used most of them, and religions are no strangers to them either, adding others like taboos, blasphemy rules, heresy charges, apophatic or “negative” theology (speaking of unknowable entities in terms of what cannot be said about them, or acknowledging that unknowability is one of the traits of deity), and after-life punishments. However, it can be fairly concluded that the congeries of agnocracy have congealed today into a conspicuous governance by ignorance, a veritable agnocracy.

Around the world, including in places where democracy once seemed secure, agnocracy is becoming ordinary, blatant, and remarkably standardized. Every one of the aforementioned tactics is emerging as the norm of rule in ever more countries, but none more so than lying and disinformation. Lying and disinformation are so common and open in modern Russia that Masha Gessen (2016) has dubbed them “the Putin paradigm,” the fundamental principle of which is, “Lying is the message.” Putin’s euphemistic “special military operation” in Ukraine (an example of the control of language comparable to anything in Orwell’s *1984*) is just one theater in which the Russian president “insisted on lying in the face of clear and convincing evidence to the contrary, and in each case his subsequent shift to truthful statements were not admissions given under duress: they were proud, even boastful affirmatives made at his convenience.” In an important report for the Rand Corporation, Paul and Matthews (2016) summarized Putin’s campaign of lies and propaganda as a “firehose of falsehood,” a “shameless willingness to disseminate partial truths and outright fictions” characterized by four features:

- it is “high-volume and multichannel”
- it is “rapid, continuous, and repetitive”
- it “lacks commitment to objective reality”
- it “lacks commitment to consistency.”

Like the blast of water from a firehose, this mighty stream of prevarication, with no regard for external reality or internal consistency, overwhelms its target and renders them unable to respond or defend themselves. Worst of all, the authors presciently warn that critics cannot “expect to counter the firehose of falsehood with the squirt gun of truth.”

In their report for the Institute of Modern Russia, Pomerantsev and Weiss delve deeper into how the Kremlin “weaponizes information” in order “to confuse, blackmail, demoralize, subvert and paralyze” (2014, p. 4). Having abandoned the goal to persuade its citizens and the outside world, it pursues no other course than “to sow confusion via conspiracy theories and proliferate falsehoods” (p. 6). In the country that invented *dezinformatsiya* during the Stalin era, successive governments culminating with Putin have flooded media, diplomacy, and culture with untruths in order “to distort domestic or foreign political sentiment, most frequently to achieve a strategic and/or geopolitical outcome” consisting of “false news, disinformation, or networks of fake accounts (false amplifiers aimed at manipulating public opinion)” (Weedon, Nuland, and Stamos 2017, p. 5) Many observers have judged Russia to be far ahead of most countries in malignant information operations, which are termed reflexive control in Russia. Reflexive control is a program to analyze the ideas and decision-making processes of the enemy and use that knowledge against them—tricks like “camouflage (at all levels), disinformation, encouragement, blackmail by force, and the compromising of various officials and officers” in order “to influence his combat plans, his view of situation, and how he fights” (Thomas 2004, p. 241-2). Again, these maneuvers are as easily turned inward as outward.

Putin’s and Russia’s agnocracy has been baleful enough in its own right, but it is a paradigm precisely because it is paradigmatic, a prototype for others to emulate. Putin’s most powerful acolyte and ally, as Gessen stresses, is Donald Trump, who has “repeatedly expressed admiration for the way Putin governed”—that is, agnocratically. Indeed, Gessen bundles the two in her essay, since “they lie in the same way and for the same purpose.”

It is well documented that Trump is a promiscuous liar: *The Washington Post* (2021) calculated that he made 30,573 false or misleading claims during his first four years in office, which averages to 21 lies per day. Nor did he repent or relent when he lost re-election, instead tirelessly peddling The Big Lie that the election was stolen, while lying about and denying his removal of White House papers, his suborning of voter fraud in Georgia, and of course his role in the January 6, 2021 insurrection

to overthrow Biden's win. Back in office in January, 2025 he has resumed where he left off, lying about his popularity among young voters, inflation under Biden, Ukraine's responsibility for its own invasion, the cause of California wildfires, the nature of tariffs, the world's approval of his aggressive intentions for Canada and Gaza, and many more.

James Pfiffner (2019) assigns Trump's lies to four categories—trivial lies, exaggerations and self-aggrandizement, lies to deceive the public, and egregious lies. Together, this habit wraps him in a cloud of mendacity, but the egregious lies interest us the most. For example, in a 2018 meeting with Canada's Justin Trudeau, Trump tossed out a figure for America's trade deficit with Canada, when (a) the U.S. had a trade surplus and (b) Trump later admitted that he "had no idea" what the truth was. Nevertheless, recently he reiterated the (still false) claim, adding that Europe does not buy American produce or cars, equally false.

Such utterances—and there are many—transcend lies and enter the realm of what Harry Frankfurt memorably called bullshit. For Frankfurt, a lie presumes knowledge of the truth; bullshit, in contrast, is indifferent to truth. For a bullshitter, "the truth-values of his statements are of no central interest to him"; unlike a liar, "he is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false. His eye is not on the facts at all... He does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose" (2005, pp. 55-6). Among Trump's most exquisite recent bullshit are his assertion that Haitian immigrants were eating pets and his administration's claims that only six percent of federal employees work onsite full-time or that \$50 million—no, \$100 million—was earmarked for condoms in Gaza.

Brazen lies and blatant bullshit would be corrosive enough to American political discourse, but Trump's agnocracy goes much further and in the footsteps of Putin. He and his followers and enablers trade in conspiracy theories and false flag operations; a reprehensible case of the latter involved the Texas Republican Party's 2019 plan to build fake websites, load them with negative and false information on Democratic rivals, and hijack traffic from legitimate sites to their fake ones (Zelinski 2019). Other sources, from Alex Jones' "Infowars" to Fox News to

individual deep-fake creators like Brenden Dilley who knowingly circulated false photographs of election workers allegedly mishandling ballots, provide content to Trump or amplify Trump's content in a vicious media circle.

We cannot ignore the role of fake news in Trump's agnocracy. "Fake news" is a double-edged rhetorical sword in Trump's armory. On the one hand, it is an accusation he hurls at any report, journalist, or news source that dares challenge him. He has repeatedly lambasted mainstream journalists and outlets as fake news, even more dangerously branding them "enemies of the people." His threats against legitimate news have escalated, including exclusion of individual journalists or entire news outlets from press briefings and the press pool, lawsuits, and warnings that he would cut funding or revoke licenses. On the other hand, fake news is a valid description of sources that promote false, misleading, or incomplete information under the guise of "news." Fox News, again, is a prime culprit, admitting in court that it knew its coverage was false but persisted nonetheless; however, there are abundant fake news outlets, including Newsmax, imposter sites like ABCNews.com.co and CBSNews.come.co (the ".co" is the giveaway), and the complex of "pink slime" newspapers and websites that masquerade as independent local news but recycle the same false, biased, and slanted material.

Trump deploys every trick in the agnocrat's playbook, including attacking higher education and excising or deleting government websites, but the previous paragraphs illustrate that agnocracy requires an ecosystem of information-suppressors and falsehood purveyors, not just the actions of a single man. Indeed, despite their power, if agnocracy were the work of one or two figures like Putin and Trump, it would not deserve our full attention. Instead, though, agnocracy is a global and interlocked enterprise, played in virtually the same key around the world. The UK was complicit in America's dishonest build-up to the Iraq war, and former prime minister Boris Johnson was almost as accomplished a liar as Trump. Other agnocrats rely heavily on knowledge control and limitation, especially when it comes to the internet. Turkey's president (since 2014) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has taken steps to silence dissent in a country where there is already "a government monopoly over the

traditional media,” with 90 percent of media sources owned by large businesses with close personal ties” to the president (Ozeren and Cubukcu 2022). Unsatisfied with that monopoly, he has acted “to censor and block access to online media that are critical of the government’s policies,” perversely castigating such criticism as “disinformation” in a bill that “mimics Russia’s attempt to clamp down on social media.” More recently, an amendment to the Turkish Penal Code would effectively condemn journalists who report negatively on the regime as “spies” and foreign agents, and access to Twitter/X was blocked. Meanwhile, Erdoğan cranks out actual non-knowledge via “one of the largest state-backed troll armies, the so-called AK-trolls [which] manipulate the public through disinformation campaigns and fake news.” (It merits mentioning that domestic and international troll farms also feed Trump’s “disinformation space,” as Ukraine’s Volodymyr Zelenskyy accurately diagnosed it.)

Elsewhere, India’s Narendra Modi (prime minister since 2014) leads a country where, according to the World Economic Forum (2024), the number one national risk is misinformation and disinformation (they ranked it the number six risk in the United States). Infractions against the truth vary from misleading or doctored photographs (which do not refer to what they purport to be about) and deepfakes to campaign lies; the 2019 elections “were already dogged by concerns of rampant false information, but experts say the problem has only intensified—fueled by the growth of generative artificial intelligence” (de Guzman 2024). Surely enough, the 2024 election was worse, with unabashed lies about the opposition Congress Party and false and inflammatory remarks about imaginary Muslim privilege (and that to support Congress Party was to “vote jihad”). Modi also enlists a troll army and, uniquely, a stable of “shadow advertisers” that spew “propaganda targeting the general opposition” and hate speech. Simultaneously, mainstream portals like Facebook were filled the dishonest election ads “to foster, promote, and accelerate disinformation, hate speech, and harmful conspiracy theories,” as well as “Islamophobia, smear campaigns, and divisive narratives” (Ekō, India Civil Watch International, and Foundation the London Story 2024)..

Hungary’s Viktor Orbán (prime minister since 2010) joins the agnocrats in spreading lies,

disinformation, and conspiracy theories, particularly about immigrants and the European Union, which he absurdly likened to Stalinism. Like Modi, Erdoğan, and Trump, he too harps on the political myth of his country’s former greatness and the liberal and globalist forces that undermine it. Orbán also explicitly attacked liberal higher education in his campaign against Central European University, founded by nemesis George Soros. Under a new law to privatize state universities while subjecting research institutions to the authority of a state “Ministry of Innovation,” CEU was driven from the country, relocating in the (for now, at least) friendlier setting of Vienna, Austria.

Perhaps the epitome of agnocracy reigns in China, where Xi Jinping has been leader since 2012. González and Price (2023) posit that China has achieved the status of “digital police state,” where “much of the population is willing to comply with intrusive surveillance, geospatial monitors, mandatory biometric scans, and so on in exchange for more efficient delivery of services.” This extends beyond the country’s borders, closely watching overseas Chinese and minorities like Uyghurs. At home, information is tightly controlled by the regime, for instance through the Golden Shield Project, better known as the “Great Firewall,” which restricts online access via “bandwidth throttling, keyword filtering [as in the video game discuss above], and blocking access to certain websites” (Xu and Albert 2017). Domestic internet providers must sign a government pledge, and foreign companies must agree to abide by domestic law. Further, “Specific material considered a threat to political stability is also banned, including controversial photos and video, as well as search terms” and any reference to “official corruption, the economy, health and environmental scandals, certain religious groups, and ethnic strife.” Obviously, local journalists are monitored or arrested, particularly if they report on or from Hong Kong; at least 38 were jailed in 2017 alone. Equally obviously, such ambitious agnocracy demands extensive resources, which include over a dozen government agencies (like the Central Propaganda Department and the State Internet Information Office) and a workforce of two million who “are responsible for reviewing internet posts using keyword searches and compiling reports for ‘decision makers.’ These so-called ‘public opinion analysts’ are hired both by the state and private

companies to constantly monitor China's internet." Predictably, China ranks near the bottom of countries for press freedom.

## Discussion

### Why Agnocracy Now?

Agnocratic ploys and machinations are nothing new; again, Plato recognized and applauded them. But agnocracy as a distinct, arguably dominant, style of governance is different, both because the agnocratic style is so pervasive today—counting India, China, Russia, the United States, and many smaller countries, the majority of the human race lives under agnocracy—and because its practices are so dreadfully transnational. This is why the present article argues that agnocracy deserves to be named and studied as a political phenomenon in its own right.

A question, and an irony, then arises: why agnocracy now, in the early twenty-first century, when information has never been more abundant and available? After all, the internet and Worldwide Web were supposed to be an "information superhighway," but they have proven to be a mis/disinformation superhighway with many roadblocks and potholes. Further, we cannot but help to notice that agnocracy appears to be enmeshed with anocracy if not autocracy and certainly with the dilution of democracy globally. Agnocracy is not inherently partisan: all leaders can and have used lies, secrets, silence, evasion and such to acquire, exercise, and accumulate power, and until recently such tactics were more associated with the left (e.g., Soviet Union). However, it is not politically biased to note that today's agnocrats reign almost entirely on the right.

The first inclination is to treat agnocracy as a matter of epistemology, which undoubtedly has some validity. The philosophical endeavor of epistemology has always been the search for what qualifies as knowledge and the standards by which knowledge-claims are warranted. It presumes that we cannot say in advance what counts as knowledge or truth and that the standards for warranting knowledge are not self-evident; if we could stipulate knowledge or truth and provide a priori standards, there would be no need for epistemological inquiry.

A facile answer, then, is that agnocrats and their publics are perpetrators and victims, respectively, of bad epistemology. They lack what philosophers

call epistemic virtue—either the skill or will to know truly and to reject error and falsehood—and display epistemic akrasia (*a-*, no/without + *kratos*), a deficiency of mental or moral self-control to jettison the false and accept the true. Or, more significantly, scholars have come to recognize that there is not one authoritative epistemology but multiple epistemologies (perhaps equivalent to Foucault's truth regimes and discursive practices), with no meta-epistemological way to adjudicate between them.

The epistemological question has vexed humanity forever, but it is particularly acute in the (post-)modern era. We simply do not know what is true. To start, the available facts on many subjects are insufficient to determine grander truths; for instance, we have a lot of information about the human body or the cosmos but cannot answer certain questions about either with much confidence, from cures for various diseases to the origin of the universe. Furthermore, perhaps exactly because we have more data than ever, many aspects of physical and social reality are more complicated and uncertain today than before. Indeed, uncertainty has been offered as a defining trait of the (post-)modern condition, as the Enlightenment hope of linear progress toward truth fades. Then, of course, there is the clash of competing truths, not least between religions, and between religion and nonreligion, but also and arguably more immediately between cultures and civilizations. Cultural diversity and migration have unsettled many claims that one group or another take for granted as true. Finally, there is definitely much that transpires beyond our awareness and understanding, leaving inevitable gaps in our knowledge and facilitating suspicions and conspiracy theories to fill the blanks.

Speaking of clashing truths and conspiracy theories, a major contributor to our epistemological predicament is the fragmentation and proliferation of news outlets and the overall decay of authority. Not long ago, most citizens got their information from the same general sources, which were accepted (rightly or wrongly) as authoritative. Today, there are so many (mis/dis)information sources that people can comfortably sequester in silos and bubbles, which act like echo chambers for what they already accept as knowledge. It is all too easy to pump propaganda, misinterpretation, and pure fabrication into this

system and deliver it, unquestioned, to audiences, who hear and believe virtually nothing else.

Subsequently, in this (post-)modern condition, some have insisted that there is no truth, only perspectives and power relations. The prophet of this message may be Foucault, who replaced truth with regimes of truth and sets of discursive practices (although long before him, Nietzsche elevated perspective and interpretation above facticity). Baudrillard too contended that reality was already displaced by simulacra, which appear or feel more real and true than reality itself. Such postmodernists and deconstructionists are often blamed for the present “post-truth” crisis, in which truth is indistinguishable from opinion and belief (say, opinions, beliefs, and lies become simulacra of truth, veritable informulacra) and there are neither shared truths nor standards for warranting truth. However, postmodernists and deconstructionists did not make it so, only discover and report it. Besides, most agnocrats are almost certainly unaware of the work of these scholars, who were usually of a leftist/critical persuasion. Ironically, this does not mean that most people have given up on the idea of truth: research suggests that they still believe in truth but feel that they alone have the truth and others have only lies and disinformation.

In any or all of these circumstances, populations are highly susceptible to agnomancy and agnocracy, since it is not easily discernible when a leader is keeping secrets, imposing silence, evading, propagandizing, or lying. But we cannot rest with a purely epistemological analysis: first, most people are not epistemologists, experts in the demands of knowledge, and second, there are many other factors that shape our knowledge-claims besides epistemological ones. That is, there are important non-epistemic or subdoxastic reasons why people “know” that X is true and Y is false.

The first non-epistemic basis for taking a particular knowledge position is the cross-culturally prevalent sense of disappointment and often humiliation. Enlightenment values, science, and democracy did not deliver the promised improvements to human life. And in the non-West (which includes Russia and even Hungary), the West is accused of cultural imperialism and held culpable for the corrosion of their identities and civilizations. On both sides of the

West/non-West divide, large portions of population are prepared to abandon the venerable truth project. And unfortunately, many contemporary truths are decidedly inconvenient and unpleasant, from climate change and species extinction to political decline and economic stagnation, making non-knowledge a welcome escape.

A second non-epistemic factor is trust and distrust. Individuals are more likely to accept (i.e., to classify as true) the claims of those they trust and to reject (i.e., to deem false) the claims of those they distrust. This goes very far in explaining why agnocrats inundate the culture and media with falsehoods while attacking, denigrating, and demonizing those who disagree with or “fact-check” them. If leaders can sow distrust in particular figures—journalists, scientists, professors, etc.—they can preemptively discredit any competing and debunking knowledge those figures advance. Indeed, much of agnomancy and agnocracy is expressly intended to instill doubt about rival, critical sources, to question their motives and integrity, and to prejudice followers against their knowledge and truths.

A third and closely related non-epistemic element is identity and commitment. Research indicates that people tend to trust and believe others who are like them and who are perceived to be “on their side.” When identities and commitments are shared, it is assumed that knowledge sources have the members’ best interests at heart, giving those sources a reason to speak the truth. The result is more-or-less bounded—and defended—epistemic communities with common affiliative truths (Kalpokas 2019, p. 9), tribal epistemologies, and the aforementioned information silos and epistemic bunkers. In fact, Roberts (2017) explicitly tied Trump to tribal epistemology early in his first term.

This takes us to our ultimate point. If politics has never had much regard for truth, then we cannot interpret agnocracy as merely an epistemological phenomenon. Politics is not fundamentally about truth but about action, and for purposes of action, secrecy, silence, evasion, disinformation, and lies may be more effective than truth. And action entails overcoming political resistance—from opponents and the general public—which is why, Kalpokas reasons (without using the term), for agnocracy

“victory is truly what matters” (2019, p, 14), that is, efficacy of communication outweighs veracity.

Gessen (2016) grasps this clearly when she says of Putin, Trump, and other practitioners of the Putin agnocracy paradigm that its entire mission is “to assert power over truth.” Wherever it resides, and whatever its (depressingly conventional) tactics, the underlying meaning and effect of the agnocrat is that “power lies in being able to say what he wants, when he wants, regardless of the facts. He is president of his country and king of reality.” Such a leader is a veritable sovereign in Carl Schmitt’s terms, who embodies and makes enduring or permanent “the exception” and instigates new political facts on the ground. Therefore, he is almost necessarily an autocrat, imposing his will on society and reality, which means he has almost no option but to be an agnocrat, since he is not describing reality but making reality—and reality as it exists almost always defies and refutes him, so unreality and untruth are his allies. Supporters of agnocracy, finally, cheer the deceitfulness as a sign of strength, an unwillingness to bend to norm or fact, and as a poke to the “normies” who represent all that is stale and corrupt and who are kept ever off-balance and reactive. Meanwhile, opponents of agnocracy so far mostly stand stunned and helpless in the face of the agnocrat’s utter disregard for argument or proof.

### **Conclusion**

Politics is a means to an end, not a search for truth. As such, honesty is not always the best policy or at least not the best road to reach one’s policy goals. This essay has argued that non-truth, which occurs in many forms and is accomplished by many methods, has always been part of politics but is alarmingly central to contemporary politics—so much so that scholars would benefit from naming it and studying it formally. The name proposed here is agnocracy.

The essay describes various guises that political ignorance-making takes and illustrates them with real examples from contemporary politics. It relates the political project of agnocracy to the more general processes of agnotology, which happen in all areas of society. Finally, it commences the analysis of contemporary sociopolitical forces and experiences that make non-knowledge easier to achieve and more appealing to accept.

Critics—and agnocrats and their supporters—might respond that a certain degree of deception is necessary in political (and general human) affairs, which is valid. Others might contend that dishonesty is no greater today than in the past or that non-knowledge is not actually fundamental to present-day politics, but quantitatively these defenses seem weak. Finally, still others might insist that it is difficult or impossible to know the truth and that all judgments of truth or falseness are relative or futile. However, while granting that knowledge is contested and elusive, sometimes facts are clear and lies are blatant, and we can confidently conclude that today’s agnocrats prodigiously lie, know they are lying, and do not care that they are lying.

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The sole author was responsible for the conceptualization, methodology, data collection, analysis, writing, and final approval of the manuscript.

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