

# **UCLA**

## **Electronic Green Journal**

### **Title**

Review: An Introduction to the Sociology of Ignorance: Essays on the Limits of Knowing

### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8jd89294>

### **Journal**

Electronic Green Journal, 1(39)

### **Author**

Laberge, Yves

### **Publication Date**

2016

### **DOI**

10.5070/G313929832

### **Copyright Information**

Copyright 2016 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

**Review: An Introduction to the Sociology of Ignorance: Essays on the Limits of Knowing**

Edited by Linsey M. McGoey

**Reviewed by Yves Laberge**

Quebec, Canada

McGoey, Linsey M., editor. *An Introduction to the Sociology of Ignorance: Essays on the Limits of Knowing*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2014, 131 pp. ISBN: 9781138779679, hardback. US\$ 160.00.

This short book includes six articles related to the social study of ignorance and its consequences. In other words, how do individuals and decision-makers act and react in unsure or unpredictable situations, and how does this unawareness guide their perceptions and decisions? Keeping these goals in mind, these authors in sociology of ignorance deploy a variety of topics that are of interest in Social Epistemology and especially Environmental Studies, e.g. risk, expertise, governance and policies. For many environmentalists and for policymakers in environmentally-related problems, this notion of ignorance is proven to be a frequent guide in acting (and in non-acting) with regards to environmental issues.

Even more than ignorance and Ulrich Beck's concept of risk, the notion of uncertainty is also used by scholars to describe the future (p. 87). All contributors in this book insist on the idea that ignorance should not be seen as just the opposite of "knowing" because "not knowing" can be infinite and in unpredictable directions. Furthermore, there are more "unknown things" than "familiar notions" and certainties, and "not knowing" can be a guide for many people who doubt; this can explain (in part) the "various forms of standardization and rationalization" studied by so many social scientists in bureaucracies (Jacqueline Best, p. 87).

Environmental issues are discussed and conceptualized, for example in Steve Rayner's chapter about "Uncomfortable Knowledge" which in one specific case describes Sustainable Development as a "Constructive Ambiguity" (Steve Rayner, p. 112). As such, what policies are put in place in the case of unpleasant decisions that have to be taken? Another concept related to ignorance, "denial" can help scholars in their understanding of decision-makers who are reluctant to change or to adopt reforms:

"In a more sociological sense, denial does not refer to the cognitive or affective state of individuals, but to the refusal or inability of organizations at any level to acknowledge information, even when external bodies or even individuals within seek actively to bring it to the collective attention" (Steve Rayner, p. 114).

This position, aptly explained in clear and broad terms by Rayner, could be applied to many environmental problems like climate change and global warming, as many persons in positions of power (the so-called "skeptical" observers) publically deny such problems.

Neither a handbook nor a comprehensive survey of this elusive question, *Introduction to the Sociology of Ignorance* edited by Linsey McGoey will serve as a partial but

nonetheless interesting overview of Ignorance Studies and more generally in the fields of Social Epistemology and Social Theory. All chapters are rigorous and well documented. Incidentally, Routledge has also published a comprehensive handbook, possibly the first of its kind on this matter, the impressive *Routledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies* (2015), edited by Matthias Gross and Linsey McGoey.

---

Yves Laberge, Ph.D., < [ylaberge@uottawa.ca](mailto:ylaberge@uottawa.ca) >, Centre de recherche en éducation et formation relatives à l'environnement et à l'écocitoyenneté – Centr'ERE, Québec, Canada

**Electronic Green Journal, Issue 39, Fall 2015, ISSN: 1076-7975**