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SEÇÃO: ENTREVISTA/INTERVIEW

Interview with Peter Burke¹: about ignorance nowadays

Entrevista con Peter Burke: acerca de la ignorancia hoy

Entrevista com Peter Burke: sobre a ignorância na atualidade

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Abstract: Interview with Peter Burke about ignorance nowadays.

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Resumen: Entrevista a Peter Burke sobre la ignorancia en la actualidad.

Palabras clave: Ignorancia. Política. Desinformación. Noticias falsas. Historia.

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Interestingly, thinking about ignorance has become part of the concerns of many researchers in various areas of the humanities in recent years. Peter Burke, after writing *The Social History of Knowledge*, is currently dedicated to writing about *The Social History of Ignorance*, a theme he prepares for the next book.

In addition to Burke, other authors have devoted themselves to the theme. The Israeli Yuval Harari, in two of his books, presents specific warning points about ignorance as an engine for knowledge and not only as its opposite. In *A brief history of humanity*, this author tells us that one of the main differences of modern science is exactly the fact that it constitutes itself as a tradition with a predisposition to admit ignorance, in Latin *Ignoramus* - we do not know. After admitting ignorance, scientists set out to obtain new knowledge that ultimately materializes in new technological processes and new powers. And this has become the great paradox of science today, in which the production of scientific and technological knowledge is subordinated to the production of profit, as Nick Couldry, of the London School of Economics and Political Science, says.

Yuval Harari also points out that the ancient knowledge traditions admitted only two types of ignorance. The first focused on an individual who could ignore something important, but that ignorance would be easily



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¹ Peter Burke holds the title of Professor Emeritus at the University of Cambridge, and six honorary doctorates. He was previously a lecturer at the University of Sussex. In Brazil, he was a visiting professor at the Institute of Advanced Studies of Universidade de São Paulo, in the 1990's. Burke has written dozens of books, among them *Popular culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978), *The Renaissance* (1987), *The fabrication of Louis XIV* (1994), *A social history of knowledge* (2 v., 2000-2012), and (with Asa Briggs) *A social history of the media* (2002).

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fixed by that individual's interest in knowledge. The second, when an entire tradition could ignore unimportant things, not passed on by religious narratives or by the Gods because they were unimportant in their contexts and temporalities.

So, for Harari, *"modern science is a special tradition of knowledge in that it openly admits collective ignorance about more important issues"*, which made it more flexible, dynamic and inquisitive than any other tradition of knowledge. However, this predisposition brought along with it the premise that we do not know everything and that evidence cannot prove everything, which leads us to confront the other regimes of truth, namely: experience, values and beliefs.

In a more recent book, Harari says that *"the world is getting more and more complex and people don't realize how ignorant they are"*. Consequently, people who know almost nothing about science, geopolitics, climate change start to give opinions and become opinion leaders in channels on major digital platforms. For this author, *"people rarely contemplate their ignorance, because they close themselves in an echo chamber with friends who think like themselves and with news feeds that confirm themselves, causing their beliefs to be constantly reiterated and rarely challenged"*. Paradox of the famous bubbles.

The English historian Peter Burke, who we brought to ALCAR 2017 and who also held, in April 2021, a conference at the invitation of the National Network to Combat Disinformation,² in an article published in *Revista Piauí* in September 2020, talks about the politics of ignorance and the ignorance of politics and states that, differently from what we thought, that is, that we had been in a knowledge society for about 30 years, nowadays we find ourselves in a society of ignorance. In his words, *"This uncomfortable awareness raises a challenge. How to study the lack of knowledge? One of the responses has been to examine current practices for hiding information or circulating fake news (which we used to call simply "lies"), describing these activities as examples of the "construction",*

"production" or "fabrication" of ignorance, when, for example, they cover up calamities or argue that a particular drug has no dangerous side effects. It would be more precise to speak of "maintenance" than of "production" of ignorance, but the dramatic language used nowadays has the advantage of catching public attention".

Burke immediately challenges our proposition of construction, I speak of our book *The intentional construction of ignorance* (Ana Regina Rêgo and Marialva Barbosa), but we must admit that we feel inclined to a middle ground between our proposition of construction and that of a great historian, we work with the construction of ignorance and he does it with the maintenance. We opted for construction because we went to the root of the strategies that try to plant doubts in the already consolidated scientific narratives, using processes similar to the construction of science and the construction of the credibility of modernity narratives, but we also believe that there is a lot of maintenance of the status of ignorance that matches the mystique, the belief and the values already assimilated by societies in their *habitus*.

Peter Burke also addresses all the knowledge accumulation and the excess of information available to humanity today, highlighting that this humanity is unable to absorb it. He talks about the governing authorities who make decisions based on beliefs and not on evidence and end up harming the people. Again, in his words, many current leaders: *"are ignorant and, what is worse, they ignore their own ignorance. They are as isolated in the Oval Office or in the Planalto Palace as Filipe II in the Escorial, and are closely supervised when they meet 'the people'. In any case, some of them prefer to ignore knowledge that does not suit them"*.

On April 19, 2021 we talked to Peter Burke at an event of the National Network to Combat Disinformation RNCd Brazil and shortly afterwards we had a conversation with the historian about the theme that afflicts us at the time, which resulted in this interview.

Peter Burke holds the title of Professor Emeritus at the University of Cambridge, and six honorary

² Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yhlq_U8g_pw&t=1503s.

doctorates. He was previously a lecturer at the University of Sussex. In Brazil, he was a visiting professor at the Institute of Advanced Studies of Universidade de São Paulo, in the 1990's. Burke has written dozens of books, among them *Popular culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978), *The Renaissance* (1987), *The fabrication of Louis XIV* (1994), *A social history of knowledge* (2 vols., 2000-2012), and (with Asa Briggs) *A social history of the media* (2002).

At our meeting in June 2017 at the X National Congress of Media History in São Paulo, you, at the opening conference, were already contesting the new nomenclatures that have become fashionable, namely: post-truth and fake News (term popularized by Donald Trump to put the press under suspicion), which, in summary, would be a new dimension of the lie now potentiated by the network society and which also forms the scope of maintaining ignorance. How do you envision this phenomenon today and how does it differ from the France of Louis XIV so well explored in your book *The Making of the King*?

The circulation of lies has multiplied beyond anything that I imagined as recently as 2017, thanks to the increasing importance of social media. The scale and the speed of the processes of 'misinformation' and 'disinformation' have become very different from the France of Louis XIV. The target of the messages has also changed. Since 1789 it has increasingly been the 'people' as a whole (in both genuine and pseudo-democracies) rather than an elite, as it was in the time of Louis. However, the aims of the 'disinformers' remain much the same – deceive and divide enemies, while mobilizing supporters.

In an article published last year in *Revista Piauí*, you highlighted, right at the beginning, the kind of paradox in which we seem to find ourselves: although the classification of "knowledge society" has been touted to contemporary society, mainly because of the abundant access to information made possible by technologies,

we also live in a "society of ignorance". I would like you to talk a little more about the topic and, above all, to characterize the aspects that make contemporary society the society of ignorance.

Let me emphasize at the start that I do not claim that we live in a 'society of ignorance' *rather than* a knowledge or information society, but refer to the paradoxical co-existence of two trends, the growth of information and the growth of ignorance. It diminishes the paradox to point out that no society is homogeneous, that each contains better-informed and worse-informed individuals – but the coexistence of oppose trends remains a problem.

A view from the history of the media may at least help us understand the problem. The rise of the internet and of digitization has made much more information available much more quickly to many more people. Together with an earlier trend, the rise of computers, it has led too many more jobs in the information sector – one of the main criteria employed by economists discussing the 'information society'. The downside of these developments includes 'overload', with information arriving faster than it can be turned into knowledge (classified, verified, analysed).

Then came the rise of social media allowing users to disseminate messages at unprecedented speed and scale. It is a kind of democratization, allowing many more people to send as well as to receive messages. But many of these people have not learned to be critical of the messages they receive and send on. This was already a problem in the past, with rumours of plots leading to riots and pogroms, but the shift from orally propagated rumour to Facebook etc is an enormous change of scale. Education has to change to enable users of social media to become less credulous, to learn to criticize what they read or send on. Meanwhile, we have problems!

At our last meeting in April 2021, you stated that anthropologists and historians quickly discovered the many characteristics of ignorance, which in summary can be deliberate or unconscious, genuine or feigned, as well as they have disco-

vered the boundaries, sometimes open, between ignorance and uncertainty, ignorance and secrecy, ignorance and credulity, among other aspects. You, like other historians, have been dedicated for some time to study the Social History of Ignorance. What can you tell us about the historical crossings of ignorance and their relationship with the temporal structures of power?

Rulers have long been concerned to keep the majority of the ruled in ignorance, whether generally (keeping women and the peasants and working class unable to read and write) or specifically (censoring what could be published). Their general attempts became less and less successful – in France in 1789, in England in the 19th century, in much of the world after the invention of the radio, etc. On the other hand, their attempts to keep the public ignorant of certain events have become more frequent (Peter Galison has tried to measure this for the USA) and more sophisticated. We need a history of secrecy, propaganda and disinformation – a good topic for a team of historians publishing several volumes.

You pose the challenge of producing a social history of ignorance, the theme of your next book, in which it would be essential to ask what, in a given place and at a certain time, someone ignored, to know who ignored, what was ignored, what would be the causes of this ignorance and, above all, what consequences they produced. With that, it would be possible to unveil the historical proceduralities and, at the same time, to identify particularities related to the social world at certain times. It is undoubtedly a fascinating story, but at the same time challenging from a theoretical and methodological point of view. I would like you to talk a little bit about the differences in this history of social ignorance and other social stories that also involve the production of meaning (history of fear, history of emotions, for example). And what specificities would there be in this social history of ignorance that would bring it closer and further from the interpretative possibilities of a social history?

To begin with method: the obvious problem is that of studying an absence. A possible partial solution is a comparative method. Every scientific discovery leads to awareness of earlier ignorance – the blank spaces on the map of knowledge. Today, an age of social surveys, some concern the knowledge of politics and religion. Failure to answer some questions offers testimony of ignorance.

Historians of science have also noted that some discoveries reveal current ignorance as well as past ignorance and so offer clues about what should be studied next.

My own interest is especially in the consequences if ignorance, usually bad, in domains such as business, politics and war. But what is bad for the ignorant person, group or institution may be good for competitors or enemies.

The history of emotions faces a different kind of problem, that of studying the unconscious. What historians in fact study is the expression, repression or management of emotions, since these processes leave traces on records of the past.

Another important aspect in the production of a society of ignorance, with serious consequences for Governments in contemporary societies, would be the excess of “gossip”, that is, the excess of information existing in the 21st century. This causes social networks to produce a lot of information, but they are, in general, superficial and, above all, in a chaotic and anarchic way. Although “gossip” is defined by superficiality, it also allows people to stay in these places because they establish connections there, which lead them to a kind of ecstasy (on social networks, for example). In this sense, it is the Heideggerian gossip (a connection that produces ecstasy). Entering social media is experiencing this ecstasy. That is, the gossip can be understood in a negative way (as producing misinformation and, ultimately, ignorance) or positive (despite its superficial characteristic, it allows contact), that is, the establishment of connections in a gossip that is also ecstatic. Shouldn't the potential of the gossip be an aspect to be considered when

talking about the profusion of sayings present in the contemporary world?

I agree with you that social media permit and encourage the amplification of gossip (about individuals) as they do of rumours (about events). You may be right about ecstasy, but as an abstainer from social media, I can't say.

I am more worried about another emotion, hatred, which seems to be more freely expressed than before, by children and adults alike, as if social media offer a cloak of invisibility and impunity. Psychoanalysts doubtless have something to say about this (and perhaps have already said it).

On the positive side, I agree with you that the media allow the formation and strengthening of social bonds. E-mail allows me to keep in touch with friends in other countries, indeed to converse with them by exchanging messages the same day. For people who live in remote places or have few face-to-face friends, the social media probably enrich their lives.

As usual, almost every change has both positive and negative consequences, unevenly divided (there are winners and losers in every revolution).

An issue addressed in your reflections concerns the strategic value of ignorance, as recent studies also point out. In this sense, the ignorance of some, as you yourself observe, can be advantageous for others. I would like you to describe a little more what you call "strategic ignorance" or "politics of ignorance".

In a world full of competition and conflict, the ignorance of others plays a strategic part. Keeping one's own activities hidden is as important as discovering the secrets of others for generals, CEOs, Prime Ministers and ordinary people. Hence the importance of official secrets, disinformation, cover-ups and lies, or, in the language of 16th-17th century Europe, the importance of simulation, dissimulation, masks, cloaks and screens (as well as the exposure of these techniques – opening the cabinet, unmasking the deceiver, etc). It is not difficult to understand the appeal of transparency (though ironic that the Gorbachev who advocated

glasnost was quick to cover up the catastrophe at Chernobyl). But complete transparency would make political life impossible, since it would expose negotiations before they were finished, while their success depends on compromises that would only be accepted by the majority on both sides as *faits accomplis*.

Another important issue concerns the ignorance of politics, which is also used strategically by governments. This is evident, above all, in authoritarian regimes and even in alleged democracies dominated by extreme right-wing governments, as in the case of Brazil. It leads, in contemporary Brazil, to the production of a "scorched earth" country, which becomes even more dramatic in the context of the pandemic, causing the death of thousands of people, mainly due to the cultivation of ignorance and disinformation. I would like you to comment, in relation to the moment we are experiencing, the lasting consequences of the strategic production of ignorance as a State policy. And, above all, how can these contemporary times, which can be qualified as "dark times", borrowing Hanna Arendt's expression here, be briefly interpreted by a historical view of the present time?

Disasters in particular countries often tell observers something important about those countries, their political and social systems as well as their cultures. They shine a torch on the weaknesses of the system as well as of the people in charge of different parts of the system in a moment of crisis. Who should make the decisions – the president, the members of parliament, the public or the experts? How much corruption is there in the system? There are many lessons to be learned from a crisis such as this pandemic, and the different responses to it in different parts of the world. The lessons come too late in one sense, but not in another, since it can be assumed that the future holds many more crises.

In your speech at the April 19, 2021 event at the National Network to Combat Disinformation - RNCd Brazil, you addressed organizational

ignorance as intrinsic to the system. How can such a process harm a society?

Organizational ignorance is indeed intrinsic to the system, but the amount of it varies. Some people at the top of organizations are better listeners to their subordinates than others are. Their ignorance can harm a society at different levels, since different organizations operate at different levels. In business, if the management of a given firm do not know what the workers know, efficiency is harmed, and if the workers do not know what the management knows, there will be discontent, but if the firm fails, another can take its place. If the organization happens to be the government, the problem is a much larger one! If the rulers do not know what experts know or what the people know, they may make decisions that are disastrous for the whole country and possibly other countries as well.

In Brazil, we are experiencing, in a certain way, a disinformation pandemic that has had great consequences for democracy and now during the COVID-19 pandemic it has had irreversible consequences for the health of the Brazilian people. Led by President Bolsonaro, who contradicts science and fights against social isolation, against the use of masks and spreads propaganda for hydroxychloroquine, part of the Brazilian people is exposed to the virus in the face of the denials that permeate the spread of ignorance. So, speaking of the social consequences of ignorance, how do you see the relationship between ignorance and the advancement of the new coronavirus around the world?

There are several kinds of ignorance, as we discussed earlier. They include excusable and inexcusable ignorances. At the beginning of the spread of the virus, no one knew what it was. That was excusable, indeed inevitable, because the virus was a new one. The epidemiologists remedied the situation and discovered the remedy for the disease. As for practical measures (masks, distancing etc), they proceeded on a basis of trial

and error, since at the beginning no one knew how the virus spread. But there was more error in some places than elsewhere, and sometimes political leaders did not want to know about the virus (willful ignorance, an important variety) or take the advice of the specialists. When the history of this global epidemic comes to be written, there will be much to say about ignorance!

In addressing the ignorance of ordinary people, you said that such ignorance would be an advantage for authoritarian regimes, but a serious concern for democracies. I would like you to tell us more about that statement.

I accept the generalization that for authoritarian regimes, the ignorance of the people is an asset. Knowledge arises from and leads to questioning, and authoritarian regimes do not appreciate questions, which lead to a discussion of alternatives and so to a critique of their policies and so to protest and revolt. In the USSR in Stalin's time, besides the monopoly of the official newspapers, cafes were rare and telephone directories did not exist, as if the government assumed that when ordinary people met one another, they would soon criticize the regime – which was quite likely!

On the other side, democracies depend on voters who know something about current affairs, so as to make a rational choice between candidates for election. And so in the USA and Britain (and doubtless in other countries as well, but so far I have found nothing about surveys elsewhere) surveys of public knowledge of both home affairs and current affairs have been carried out, with disappointing results (over 30 per cent of respondents to a recent American survey were classified as politically ignorant, because they failed to answer or gave the wrong answer to at least two-thirds of the simple questions that they were asked).

In your speech at RNCd Brasil last April, you stated that in Stalin's Russia people were informed through rumors and did not believe in the press. In today's Brazil, a considerable part of Brazilians believe in the messages / narratives

that arrive by family or church groups that are considered great channels for the dissemination of uninformatonal narratives, on messaging applications, such as WhatsApp, and do not believe in the press. President Bolsonaro goes live on social media daily to discredit journalism. In your view, has anything really changed between the two realities we have mentioned here?

There are obvious similarities between the two situations, but there are differences as well. The Soviet press broadcast a uniform message, while the press in which Brazilians do not believe offers rival messages. The rumours that the Russians trusted came from people they knew and trusted, but the rumours on social media are anonymous. I am not a supporter of either information system. For a better system, two things are needed.

First, at least some broadcasters of news should be more or less free from both political and economic pressures (in Britain, we have the BBC and the Guardian).

Second, members of the public should read, listen and view wisely. That means being aware of the possible bias of their favourite channels in general and in a particular situation, and so refusing to limit themselves to a single channel.

I don't consider myself an ideal citizen but I read the *Guardian* and the *Economist* every week, hoping their biases will cancel each other out, watch the BBC version of the news but also look at important news in *Le Monde* or *La Repubblica* to escape from British views of the world!

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