

The Knowledge Problem of Privilege

How Hayekian limits to what we can know apply to the struggles and challenges of other oppressed people

In his classic essay, “The Use of Knowledge in Society,” F.A. Hayek explains the concept of distributed knowledge. Every individual has unique knowledge shaped by their experiences and preferences, knowledge that may not be accessible to others, no matter how well educated they may be. Hayek writes:

Today it is almost heresy to suggest that scientific knowledge is not the sum of all knowledge. But a little reflection will show that there is beyond question a body of very important but unorganized knowledge which cannot possibly be called scientific in the sense of knowledge of general rules: the knowledge of the particular circumstances of time and place. It is with respect to this that practically every individual has some advantage over all others because he possesses unique information of which beneficial use might be made, but of which use can be made only if the decisions depending on it are left to him or are made with his active cooperation.

Hayek then discusses examples of this knowledge as it applies in an economic context. Producers, consumers, and other individuals cooperating in a market all possess unique knowledge that only they can use, knowledge that is utterly inaccessible to any bureaucratic central planner.

But Hayek’s point about distributed knowledge applies to more than just economic issues. It also applies to social issues. Take issues of gender. Women experience misogyny in their day to day lives. Many individual women know things about sexual harassment, casual sexism, and a wide range of other gender issues that I will never know, because I am not a woman, and I do not experience them. Recognizing that this distributed knowledge exists has consequences. It means that I should not dismiss women’s experiences of sexism or presume I know more about sexism than they. It means that within the realm of feminist activism, I should not always have as important a decision making role as the women who actually experience the oppression caused by patriarchy. In other words, acknowledging distributed knowledge leads me to “check my privilege.”

Or, we could look at another example: disability. The disability rights movement has for years organized under the slogan “Nothing About Us Without Us” and opposed many groups that try to make decisions related to disability without ever consulting anyone who has a disability. For example, Autism Speaks, one of the largest autism related non-profits, has never had an autistic person on its board. In spite of their name, they do not speak for autistic people, but rather over us. They have put out fear-mongering propaganda about autism that many autistic people, me included, find highly offensive. They promote programs and “cures” that autistic people find utterly unhelpful and counterproductive. They should examine how autistic people may possess knowledge of autism that they lack. In other words, they should acknowledge distributed knowledge and check their privilege.

That said, because Autism Speaks is not a governmental organization and does not have a monopoly, autistic people can, and do, start our own organizations. So the Autistic Self Advocacy Network can provide services that autistic people actually need, and allow those with autism to speak for ourselves. If the Autistic Self Advocacy Network ever fails to serve the needs of some autistic people, these people are free to start their own groups. This is one example of how voluntary association allows distributed knowledge to be used effectively even if bigots refuse to

practice epistemic humility. Autism Speaks should still check their ignorance and privilege, but their ignorance poses less of a threat as long as they are not a government or a monopoly.

Just as with economics, these social problems of epistemological hubris become bigger when government gets involved. By definition, politicians do not have the knowledge of everyone their policies will impact. But often, when marginalized groups are impacted, politicians become extra prone to ignore those from an affected population. For example, Congress has held hearings on whether to undermine the privacy rights of “mentally ill” Americans but not allowed anyone with psychiatric disabilities to testify, not deeming them sufficiently “competent.” Another example is that those incarcerated in our prison system are barred from voting in elections. The government exacerbates its natural tendency towards lacking sufficient knowledge by disenfranchising members of marginalized groups it seeks to control. Politicians need to consider, as Hayek said, “how little they really know about what they imagine they can design.” They need to consider the experiences and knowledge of those their policies might hurt. They need to check their privilege.

Ultimately, the call for people to check their privilege is not an attempt to silence. Rather, it is an attempt to get people to recognize the limits of their knowledge. Libertarians should have the humility to check our privilege, to listen to oppressed people who discuss their experiences, and to respect oppressed peoples’ rights to direct their own struggles for liberation.



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