

Structural sin and resistant knowledge

By [Monica Poole](#)

August 23, 2016

[“White privilege is your history being taught as a core class and mine being taught as an elective,”](#) wrote a tumblr user in February of 2014. This claim illustrates how education sins in its ignorance.

Latin American liberation theologians taught that sin consists not only of personal misdeeds—it is also embedded in social structures that promote harm and inequity. Building on this work, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda [writes](#) that structural injustice

remain[s] invisible to those not suffering from it. If we do not see the structural injustice in which we live, we cannot repent of it. Failing to renounce it, we remain captive to it. Failure to see structural sin breeds complicity with it, and passes it on to the next generation. The call to renounce sin contains a call to "see" the structural sin of which we are a part, in order that we might repent of it, renounce it, and resist it.

Structural sin is sustained by our ignorance of it. Commonly we think of ignorance as the absence of knowledge. It is—in part. The formal teaching of many subjects so often excludes the voices of members of marginalized groups while over-representing white men of the upper classes. This creates a gap in a learner’s knowledge—and, more dangerously, a narrative that the most significant contributions to human knowledge are made by white, upper-class men.

Such a curriculum is incomplete, because it only centers the voices of a fragment of its contributors. Further, it erases the space where a learner might inquire, “But what did the women have to say? What did the people of color have to say?” Moreover, counternarratives of marginalized voices have been erased from the study of history for instrumental reasons: to sustain fictive patterns of remembering and forgetting that protect the ideas that members of the dominant culture have about themselves.

But absence of knowledge is only the beginning of ignorance. “Imagine an ignorance militant, aggressive, not to be intimidated,” [writes philosopher Charles Mills](#),

an ignorance that is active, dynamic, that refuses to go quietly—not at all confined to the illiterate and uneducated but propagated at the highest levels of the land, indeed presenting itself unblushingly as knowledge.

The ignorance of structural sin is not an empty space. It’s not an absence of knowledge. It’s a space filled with maladaptive knowledge.

The term *maladaptive* comes from the psychology of trauma: A trauma survivor’s ideas and habits are considered maladaptive when they were useful (or were intended to be useful) in environments of past trauma but are not useful in the survivor’s current environment. Similarly, education centered in active ignorance can be considered maladaptive knowledge. Such education was often born of and grounded in periods of more overt oppression than our own era—including colonialism, apartheid, and slavery. It functions to extend those past traumas to sustain oppression in the present.

What can we do to solve this problem? Most trauma survivors cannot simply “stop” a maladaptive habit or belief; they need to replace it with a better one. José Medina has proposed “epistemologies of resistance” as a corrective to active ignorance.

It’s not enough to add a few marginalized voices to create pluralism or diversity in education; the maladaptive knowledge will still be present. Instead, it is necessary to replace an education of ignorance with practices that resist maladaptive knowledge. Education must be decentered from its traditional dominant-culture perspective. This means moving the center away from content that is focused on the ideas and experiences of people who are over-represented—those who are white, male, straight, able-bodied, upper-class, and cisgender, for example—and toward a more heterogeneous set of voices.

It also means moving away from teaching practices that emphasize tradition, discipline, and certainty, and toward teaching practices that engage learners in criticism, discussion, and inquiry. Replacing maladaptive knowledge with resistant knowledge creates space for an education that can begin to resolve the ignorance that sustains structural sin.

This article was edited on September 8, 2016.

Our weekly feature Then and Now harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's published in partnership with [the Kripke Center](#) of Creighton University and edited by [Edward Carson](#) and [Beth Shalom Hessel](#).