
Populations of Misre/Cognition

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When Jacques Lacan coined the term “méconnaissance” or “misrecognition,” he was referring to the way in which a maturing subject comes to understand his or her encounter with his or her own reflection in the mirror—a psycho-developmental period also known as The Mirror Stage; this encounter, as Lacan ([1949] 2009) theorized, leads to the emergence of an idealized projection of who the subject is. This “Ideal I” that emerges from this encounter with the virtual Other, that is nonetheless the Self, produces both a recognition and a mis-recognition of this “I”.

On the one hand, it produces a recognition of the Self as a coherent body in which this “I” is located. On the other hand, it takes us to a mis-recognition of the Self through this virtual image that both hides aspects of the subject—and, thus, misleads the subject in his or her own self-understanding—and also reveals how we are read by others, how we are seen by them. This last point is especially important because it highlights how any representation necessarily abstracts away some elements or qualities, gives salience to others, and forecloses alternative images that might lead to different patterns of behavior and self-understanding.

What I contend in this brief commentary is that the previous reflection is of the utmost importance if we aim to take the concept of “Populations of Cognition” to its full potential. This is so because this notion needs to be dialecticized, i.e., it needs to be read both in its positivity—a population that actually exists and that is known/able, and how this population exists and can be known—and, also, in relation to its negation—a population that is misrecognized in the Lacanian sense. Again, this last possibility emerges from the foreclosure that any representation, in its inability to apprehend the whole of a phenomenon, implies.

Be this as it may, at this point it is necessary to distinguish between several epistemological positions that can be mapped in these exercises of recognizing and misrecognizing. There is, first, the position of the subject that bio-psycho-social sciences study; self-understanding, of course, as psychoanalysis shows, implies both of these processes but is of no interest to our present commentary. Then, there are the scientists that social studies of science (STS) seek to comprehend; here, cognition and misrecognition become fundamental categories for understanding how the sciences both produce knowledge and ignorance (Proctor and Schiebinger 2008), objective accounts and subjective modes of experiencing the world, hegemonic discourses and subalternities, and, in general, ways of knowing in which global knowledges coexist with a radical perspectivism that nonetheless represents the biggest challenge to a notion of objectivity as a view from nowhere. Clearly, the field of STS, in its dialogue with postcolonial, feminist, and critical race studies, needs to be fully aware of how the sciences dialectically produce knowledge whose partiality and situatedness might foreclose not only different perspectives but also ways of being-in-the-world that have existed or could exist.

And, finally, the STS scholar also faces these dialectical processes of knowing and misrepresenting; here, the awareness of this productive tension serves as an ideal that constantly confronts us with the imperative to revisit our narratives in order to explore new accounts that might lead to new questions, aims or, even, more democratic cognitive practices.

In any case, save for the first level, the dialectic between recognizing and misrecognizing is useful to grasp relationships between knowing subjects that study other knowing subjects that, therefore, are taken as objects of knowledge. Grammatically, I propose that this dialectic reading of misre/cognition could be explored by paying attention to the following six elements that, in some way or another, appear in the six empirical papers composing this special issue. In what follows I will elaborate what I mean.

1. Populations of Cognition and Territories/Borders

Populations of Cognition are defined, at least partially, in terms of the territories they occupy or have historically occupied, but, as Arjun Appadurai ([1990] 2011) has argued, there are also de-territorialized populations in which place has become only a symbolic referent that contributes to the cultural integrity and cohesiveness of a diaspora that is scattered across different territories. This point is especially clear when discussing migrants in Mexico and Central America. Feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) offers an example of this by constantly referring to Aztlán as the place of origin of Latinos in the U.S.; a place that, although mythical, nevertheless

grounds their identities and also justifies their return to an ancestral land in the actual U.S. territory.

Hence, when discussing migration flows, the coherence of the de-territorialized population in question results from two different types of cognition. First, it results through the self-understanding of the members of a population in which a place is mystified both as the site of origin and as the foundation of an identity. Second, through the construction of human difference, which scientific (cognitive) practices establish as an objective fact, written both in genes and flesh.

In this case, recognition and misrecognition operate at the same time. The point, of course, is not that phylogeography or forensics are systematically producing falsehoods, but that the truths they offer are taken as the foundation of a difference that subjects embrace, either because they reclaim it or because they find themselves situated on a grid of differences in which they are interpellated in these terms. These scientific truths, in a sense, Orientalize the Other by ascribing him/her to a specific site of origin that defines who this Other is (e.g., Said 1979). The salience of the place of origin thus serves as the locus of identity from which political action or self-understanding originates, but also as a misrecognized image in which origin narratives hide the heterogeneity, complexity, and variability within a given population and might even obscure, as I argue in section five, the historical-epistemic production of a concrete Population of Cognition.

2. Populations of Cognition and Itinerant Knowledge

The success of modern science has produced an image of knowledge in which we tend to assume its mobility as an inherent quality. This is so even if we question its universality. But perhaps most forms of knowledge are locally produced and their validity is similarly restricted to very specific situations. With this I don't aim to reinstate the myth of the universality of the Western knowledge in opposition to local ones. On the contrary, what I want to suggest is that knowledge tends to be associated with specific populations and its capacity to traverse contexts might depend on the histories of the populations that produced it and employed it to navigate the world. Here, studying the mobility of knowledge demands resisting the temptation to misrecognize it as inherently movable.

3. Populations of Cognition and Temporalities

Populations of Cognition obviously exist through time, but it would be naive to suggest that all Populations of Cognition are read as if they were synchronical. As Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) has shown, explanatory narratives

tend to take Europe or the West as their model and, thus, inadvertently impose the West as a canon of intelligibility. Most of the time, for example, alterity becomes ancestry or space (remoteness) becomes time and, hence, a measure of development, modernity, or progress. In this case, the non-identity between the knower (the scientist) and the known (the Population of Cognition) tends to impose teleological timeframes in which comparisons are made but with the unnoticed consequence of Orientalizing the Other and, thus, misrecognizing him/her.

Therefore, Populations of Cognition demand a hermeneutics between knower and known when this non-identity is the case. Only then, as feminist epistemologists have claimed, we will be able to debunk the ethnocentric perspectives that have plagued bio-psycho-social sciences. This demands that we pay attention to the frameworks employed in any research and how they are both enabling cognition, but also misrecognition of the population under scrutiny. Failing to do this is tantamount to ignoring the risks of epistemic colonialism.

4. Populations of Cognition, Embodiment and Materialities

When we are discussing the topic of cognition, it is easy to fall prey to Cartesian biases in which cognition is disembodied and dematerialized. Hand in hand with this process is also the temptation to universalize and forget the situatedness of the cognitive agent. Thankfully, the concept of a Population of Cognition reminds us first and foremost that cognition is socially mediated, temporally extended and requires embedded and embodied agents that mobilize material and semiotic resources—their culture in a materialistic sense—to navigate complex naturecultures (Haraway 2013). Thus, as a conceptual tool, Populations of Cognition enables the historian, anthropologist, or ethnographer of science to highlight these elements while linking his or her work with current debates in social epistemology and situated cognition.

Additionally, this conceptual tool brings forward the scaffolded nature of cognition, both for the studied population and for the scholar that takes a particular Population of Cognition as his or her object. This is so because describing a population demands situating it, demarcating it through spatial and temporal boundaries, and describing its organization and its relationship with an environment. Therefore, by characterizing these elements we not only situate the subjects under study, but we also identify particularly relevant scaffolds for cognition. Finally, by emphasizing the cognitive capacities of those subjects under study, we also recognize – and misrecognize – the hermeneutical nature of our research and the existence of a perspective or point of view from the studied subjects themselves, a perspective that is always irreducible to our own.

5. Populations of Cognition and Reification/Objectification

Populations of Cognition, as I have mentioned, are demarcated or identified through different knowledge practices such as forensics, population biology, phylogeography, physiology, etc. In a sense, Populations of Cognition are objectified and, thus, emerge as objects of inquiry through these practices. Nevertheless, Populations of Cognition can also be reified when they are essentialized as ancestors or when they are exoticized or Orientalized, as I mentioned in sections one and three above.

Here, cognition and misrecognition are deeply associated with producing an object of knowledge that eventually devolves into a reified object of study whose agency is negated; an example of this can be found when, for example, this process leads to racialization. A similar pernicious situation can also be found when, under the logic of biosurveillance or biocapitalism (e.g., Rajan 2006), Populations of Cognition are commodified, hence erasing the cognitive dimensions of the very subjects that compose these Populations of Cognition—with obvious ethical and political consequences like discrimination, miscegenation, or the subalternization of the Other.

The concept of Populations of Cognition can serve a regulative function by continuously reminding us that, even though knowledge practices tend to objectify populations, we should resist reifying them in any modality. There is, after all, a constitutive ethical commitment when we deal with populations of subjects fully embedded in lifeworlds.

6. Populations of Cognition and Biopolitics

Finally, the notion of Populations of Cognition has clear links to the field of biopolitical studies. This is so because populations are not mere aggregates of individuals. On the contrary, they are emergent entities with specific attributes. In this case, we are not only dealing with the entanglement between an anatomopolitics of individuals and a biopolitics of populations but also with a cognopolitics that traverses both domains and that clearly structures subjectivities and can potentially serve as a hegemonic discourse in which the Other is constituted through the cognitive practices of those that position themselves as scientists. Here, again, representing the population—objectifying it—usually goes hand in hand with the capacity to re-structure it, to intervene upon it, to mold it. This process can be either intentional or not but, in any case, it certainly exemplifies the way in which the description of a Population of Cognition can also entail the misrecognition of a group that comes to embrace an image of themselves produced by a different group, which nonetheless eventually transforms it.

To conclude, the concept of a Population of Cognition, as the empirical six papers that compose this special issue illustrate, allows us to combine a number of philosophical, historiographical, and sociological traditions in

which cognition and materiality are not opposed, in which we pay attention to the epistemological specificities of studying agents while also respecting their alterity. This notion avoids falling prey to individualism or collectivism by emphasizing the role that material and symbolic cultures play in the constitution of a population that is nevertheless composed of individuals. The concept, as I tried to show, help us to problematize space, time, heterogeneity, and the productive tension between agency and structure. And it does so while also reminding us of the ethical predicament of those who study complex cognitive agents. The concept of Populations of Cognition, then, could even be thought of under the logic of modern feminist epistemologists that emphasize that objectivity shall not be understood as neutrality, as a perspective coming from an uninvolved third person, but as an intersubjective dialogue in which a plurality of voices is taken into account. In this case, the voices of those under study and those that study them necessarily produce a plurality of perspectives that can enrich social studies of science.

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