

“Ignorance is not always bliss.” How true is this of the modern world?

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As the old saying goes, "ignorance breeds fear, fear breeds hate, hate breeds violence". In our increasingly complex world, where the pertinent issues facing humanity remain multi-faceted and highly contentious, resolving these issues remain as important as knowledge of and dedication to them is elusive. From the rise of a Salafist caliphate in the Levant, to an overwhelming exodus of peoples from the Near East and Northern Africa to Europe, it is evident that rational and well-informed discourse and political decision-making is indeed much needed if humanity wishes to progress beyond the twenty-first century. It is my belief that ignorance not only fails to confer bliss upon those who adopt it, ignorance incapacitates their ability to make rational decisions, and more often than not severely undermines their self-interest.

Firstly, ignorance impedes societal progress, rendering one susceptible to manipulation and ripe for exploitation. When one remains ignorant about politics, society and the hurdles which faze their communities, one is in no position to work toward betterment, as one is simply in no position to do so. Furthermore, when an electorate selects ignorance over conscientious participation in the democratic process, the mechanisms of power, such as the executive, judiciary and legislative branches of the state are no longer subject to checks and balances. From Caesar's Colosseum to Hitler's Strength Through Joy campaigns, malevolent dictators often seek to extend their control over the masses by keeping them ignorant, thus keeping them politically docile. Often, such autocratic power-grabs are accompanied by widespread censorship and a determined effort at disseminating propaganda. This ensures that the people not only lack the interest and will to oppose them, but also lack the knowledge and information essential for deposing these dictators. A prominent example in the modern times would be Zimbabwean society, one which is immensely repressive and in essence, the antithesis of a functioning democracy. Established in 1979 after the violent Rhodesian Bush War which ended during minority rule, President Robert Mugabe was democratically elected as the leader of the Zimbabwean people. As the President became increasingly embroiled in corruption scandals and accusations of extrajudicial killings, martial law was declared and elections suspended. The bloodthirsty dictator then embarked on ruthless extermination campaign tantamount to genocide, eliminating an estimated 20,000 ethnic Ndebele persons in what was called Gukurahundi, a Shona phrase which translates into "the early spring rain which washes away the chaff". Yet through a methodical and highly effective propaganda and censorship campaign, the electorate not only ceased to oppose martial law, but embraced it as part of "Zimbabwe's continued struggle against Western imperialism". While imaginary enemies of the state were fabricated to distract this ignorant populace, the intellectual few who saw through this ruse were completely silenced, unable to agitate for true democracy without support from a now subjugated electorate. Currently, Zimbabwe faces hyperinflation on an inconceivable scale, with cholera ravaging the urban population due to a lack of potable water, and malnutrition sweeping the countryside. Decades of economic mismanagement has left the nation in shambles while the Mugabe family and his ilk embezzle state funds. In spite of all this, many remain supportive of the incumbent leader, and most are none the wiser about Gukurahundi. Through ignorance, a functioning democracy can be converted into an autocratic regime, an electorate can be deceived and debilitated, and a once free and prosperous society can become a failed state. In the end, the ignorant find themselves in a struggle for

mere subsistence, while those who manipulate them do indeed live in bliss.

Secondly, ignorance impedes personal growth, depriving individuals of their god-given right to live life to the fullest, to explore their true potential, and to achieve self-actualisation. In Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, self-actualisation, which is the discovery of one's true intellectual or mental capacity through the completion of tasks, is placed at the top of this proverbial "pyramid". Indeed, the ability to improve the self, to challenge the self and emerge stronger, is part and parcel of a fulfilling life. Yet, ignorance deprives one of such an opportunity, eliminating the discipline and drive one must possess to embark on such an enriching, albeit arduous journey. The ignorance and lack of ability to delay gratification, in favour of immediate pleasure in the here and now, stunts their growth as fully-functioning, cognitively-developed homo sapiens. Perhaps biologist and renowned scientist Richard Dawkins had put it best when he said, "We were blessed with a bipedal physique, opposable thumbs and the greatest brain to body mass ratio in the animal kingdom, and we sacrificed it to the altar of self-indulgence and purposeless hedonism". Indeed, ignorance has drained countless hours from the bulk of our lives, as potential to grow as individuals and discover more than what one had previously known is squandered.

Thirdly, ignorance breeds fear and hate, culminating in the impediment of both society and the individual. Previously, it was established that ignorance could lead to individuals opting out of the democratic process. Yet, the damage that the ignorant could deal to both society and the individual by enticing them to participate in non-constructive politics remains undiscussed. Through ignorance, a lack of understanding materialises between the various demographics any society is composed of, with each group unable to gauge the intentions and interests of the others. In many societies, the fault lines which delineate this rift are ethno-religious in nature. With this lack of understanding, misconceptions and misunderstandings are bound to occur, further marginalising these groups from one another or even mainstream society. Transgressions, be it genuine or fabricated, are propagated or even exaggerated, and the outburst of rage which ensues could possibly lead to racially-motivated hate crimes or even racial conflict. It is evident that ignorance obscures the obvious truth that each and every group in society only strives to create a better society for the next generation to reside in. To the ignorant, the alien or hostile group is "the other", one which seeks to undermine "their way of life". While those who participate in such identity politics may still strive to preserve their self-interests, they remain counter-intuitive in doing so, undermining themselves instead. This trend is universal in human history, and no different in modern times. Throughout Europe, far-right wing parties and militias have festered, preaching hate towards immigrants and even encouraging acts of violence against them in a bid to drive them out. These include the UK's National Action and British National Party, to Greece's Golden Dawn, Hungary's Jobbik, France's National Front, the Netherlands' PVV and Germany's NPD. These hate groups capitalise on public ignorance and lack of interaction with immigrants, publicise transgressions supposedly committed by them and mobilise voters to vote against immigration, thereby voting for them and their ambitions. Not only is this politically counterproductive, it eviscerates social cohesion and stability, with a once unified society striving towards the common goal of betterment splitting into disparate political and ethnic factions, each vying for control over the other and perpetuating their own self-interests. The ignorant individual is harmed here as well, with his or her radicalisation possibly leading to hate crimes or hate speech charges in court of law, along with having to live with immense, misguided hatred of another group of people for the rest of his life.

There are still some who believe that ignorance can be blissful, that ignorance confers upon us a peace of mind which absolves us of social responsibilities, and allows us to avoid having to be concerned with the complex and seemingly unsolvable problems which plague modern society. After all, in their view, one individual is unable to alter anything or be of any use in resolving these matters which constrain human advancement. In my opinion, such an attitude is not only misguided, but wholly defeatist in nature, highlighting the lack of willpower in the ignorant to better not only themselves, but also society. Often, mass movements have changed the course of history, altering political landscapes and redirecting the trajectory a nation is headed in. Yet, these mass movements comprise civilians with no power except for that of the ballot paper, and that of a desire for freedom. Indeed, each and every person can make a difference.

In conclusion, ignorance does not translate to bliss, but rather the complete opposite of it - suffering. However, I firmly believe in knowledge's eventual triumph over ignorance, as intellectual pursuit is not only the rational decision, it is the right decision. In the words of Immanuel Kant, "Knowledge dispels".

Comments:

'Modern world' could have been addressed more explicitly by examining some relevant characteristics of the modern world. Thoughtful analysis of the issue in various aspects and levels of society, that is consistently argued. Apt and well-explained examples, but some details can be forgone as they aren't always relevant. This will give you some space and time for greater scope.