

On outsiders who know your society better

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Abstract. How can an outsider know your society better than you? Philosophers call this kind of question “epistemological.” A well-known answer amongst anthropologists is that they may know an aspect of it better: if everyone unthinkingly makes a certain assumption and the anthropologist is aware of an alternative to that assumption. I contrast that answer with an answer “derived” from the writings of George Bernard Shaw, who claimed to know America better despite never having been there.

Draft version: Version 1 (9th November 2022).

“Well, he gave us a great line

About wrestling with swine!”

An outsider claims to know your society better than you do. How can that be? You might not only wonder about this, you might doubt the claim, and furthermore feel insulted by it. In this paper I wish to add to an answer well-known to anthropologists, by presenting an answer “derived” from the writings of George Bernard Shaw. Here I do not involve myself in the evaluation of these answers, however.

The anthropologist’s answer. The members of a certain society, the insiders, might all make a certain assumption. They do not debate the assumption, for they are unaware of any alternative to it, and actually do not even notice that they make the assumption. For example, unaware of democracy, they all assume that there must be a king in the society or someone of

comparable power: a queen, a leader, etc. The outsider, the anthropologist, who does not make the assumption, owing to the different nature of their home society, can detect it. They therefore know something about this society: that its members make this assumption (see Strathern 1992: 5-7). Perhaps it is an exaggeration for the anthropologist to claim that they know the society better than its members do, but they know something about the society which its members do not.

Bernard Shaw's "answer." In the foreword to a book on socialism and capitalism, George Bernard Shaw boldly claims to know more about America than most Americans despite never having been to America, to the United States. He writes:

Now your disadvantage in belonging to a league of nations instead of to a nation is that if you belong to New York or Massachusetts, and know anything beyond the two mile radius of which you are the centre, you probably know much more of England, France, and Italy than you do of Texas or Arizona, though you are expected as an American, to know all about America. Yet I never met an American who knew anything about America except the bits she had set eyes on or felt with her boots; and even of that she could hardly see the wood from the trees. (1928: vii-viii)

Shaw goes on to give an explanation of why he knows more, which I shall not quote here, because I am probably departing from it slightly – hence my use of scare quotes around answer and derived. The explanation I derive is this. An American of the time had this order of interests:

1. Know your own state.
2. Know something of Europe.
3. Know other American states.

Usually Americans did not get around to the pursuit of the lowest ranking interest in this list. So Shaw, by reading books about America, knows more of America than most Americans. (Does some analogous reasoning explain the title of his book?!)

References

Shaw, G.B. 1928. *The intelligent woman's guide to socialism and capitalism*. Garden City, New York: Garden City Publishing Company.

Strathern, M. 1992. *After nature: English kinship in the late twentieth century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.