



Scientific Pretense vs. Democracy

Arrogance and intolerance in the name of superior expertise are antithetical to popular governance and the requirements of honest argument. But that hasn't stopped them from becoming a central feature of our political life.

By Angelo M. Codevilla

"We will restore science to its rightful place..."

—Barack Obama

UNPACKED, THIS SENTENCE MEANS: "Under my administration, Americans will have fewer choices about how they live, and fewer choices as voters because, rightfully, those choices should be made by officials who rule by the authority of science."

Thus our new president intends to accelerate a trend a half-century old in America but older and further advanced in the rest of the world. There

is nothing new or scientific about rulers pretending to execute the will of a god or of an oracle. It's a tool to preempt opposition. The ruler need not make a case for what he is doing. He need only reaffirm his status as the priest of a knowledge to which the people cannot accede. The argument "Do what we say because we are certified to know better" is a slight variant of "Do what we say because we are us."

An Old Story

THE FRENCH REVOLUTIONARY INTELLECTUALS and merchants who founded the modern state spoke of political equality. But they knew that if the masses governed, they might well have guillotined them rather than nobles and priests. And so

they set up, and Napoleon perfected, a system of government that consisted of bureaucracies. In practice and in theory, the bureaucracies defined the modern state in terms of efficient administration, which they called scientific. In 19th-century France, Prussia, and their imitators, the state set standards for schools, professions, and localities. While elected assemblies might debate abstractions, they did not deal with the rules by which people lived. Political equality and self-rule were purely theoretical, while personal latitude was at the discretion of the bureaucracies. This is the continental model of the state, best explained by G. W. F. Hegel in *The Philosophy of History* and by Max Weber in his description of the *Rechtsstaat*, the “rational-legal state.” Access to this ruling class is theoretically equal, typically through competitive exams, and its rules should apply equally. Just as in the ancient Chinese imperial bureaucracy, decisions should be made by those who know and care best: the examination-qualified bureaucrats. In modern governance, in addition to embodying the state, the bureaucrats are supposed to be the carriers of the developing human spirit, of progress.

Only in Switzerland and America did the theory and practice of popular government survive into the modern world. But note: they survived because they were planted on older, hybrid pre-Enlightenment roots.

Because the pretense of rare knowledge is the source of the modern administrative state’s intellectual and moral authority, its political essence is rule of *the few, by their own authority, over the many*. Ancient political theory was familiar with this category, distinguishing within it the rule of the money-makers for the purpose of wealth, of the soldiers for glory, or of the virtuous for goodness. But modern thought has reduced government by the few to the rule of the experts. Expert in what? In bringing all good things, it seems. This was so when Mexico’s dictator Porfirio Diaz (1876–1911) justified his rule by claiming that he was just following the impartial advice of “*los científicos*,” the scientists, about economics and public administration. Never forget that the one and only intellectual basis for Communist rule over billions of people since 1917 is the claim that Karl Marx had learned the secret formula for overcoming mankind’s “contradictions,” especially about economics. How many millions genuflected before the priests of “dialectical materialism”? To a lesser degree, the “brain trust” and “the best and the brightest” were important sources for the authority

of the Franklin Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy administrations, respectively.

The scientific subject matter to which the rulers claim privileged access matters little. Three generations ago it was economics, in our time it includes

Whether the objective be rainmaking, the avoidance of plague or falling skies, the fulfillment of fond wishes, or the affirmation of identity, the ruler’s incantations establish the presumption that he and his class know things that others do not.

everything from environmentalism to child rearing. But whether the objective be rainmaking, the avoidance of plague or falling skies, the fulfillment of fond wishes, or the affirmation of identity, the ruler’s incantations establish the presumption that he and his class know things that others do not or cannot know; that hence he and his class have the right to rule, while the rest must accept whatever explanations come from on high. *In our time, such knowledge is called science, and claiming ownership of it practically negates political equality, if not human equality altogether.* Claiming it is a political, not a scientific, act.

Knowledge and Equality

THE CLAIM THAT PUBLIC AFFAIRS (and as well many matters heretofore deemed private) are beyond the capacity of citizens to understand and too complex for them to administer, and hence that only certified experts may deal with them, must be cynical, at least to the extent to which those who make it realize that only theoretically does it transfer power to “the experts.” In practice, the power passes to those who certify the experts as experts. Surely, however, the polity’s ordinary members cease to be citizens.

Aristotle teaches that political relationships—that is, relationships among equals—depend on persuasion. Conversely, persuasion is the currency of politics only insofar as persons are equal. Whereas equals must persuade their fellows about the substance of the business at hand, despots, kings, or aristocrats exercise power over lesser beings by

SCIENTIFIC PRETENSE VS. DEMOCRACY

pointing to their status. But do those who rule on behalf of superior knowledge really know things that endow them with the right to rule? What might such things be? What subjects, what judgments, qualify as “science,” meaning matters so far beyond the horizon of ordinary human beings as to disqualify commonsense judgment about them? *What can any humans know that the knowledge of it rightly places them in the saddle and others under it? What are the*



matters on which the public may have legitimate opinions, and on what matters are their opinions illegitimate, except when expressed by leave of certified experts? Moreover, how does one accede to the rank of expert? Must one possess a degree? But neither Galileo nor Isaac Newton had any, never mind Thomas Edison. Moreover, possessors of degrees do differ among themselves. Must one be accepted by other experts? By which ones? Note also that scientists are not immune to groupthink, to interest, to dishonesty, to mutual deference or antagonism, never mind to error.

The problem is patent: Because it is as plain in our America as in all places and at all times that some men do know the public business far better than others, it follows that the people in charge should be the ones who best know what they are doing. Hence, inequality of capacity argues for political inequality. To the extent that the matters to be decided rest on expertise, any nonexperts who claim a civil or natural right to refuse to follow the experts in fact abuse those rights. At most, nonexperts may choose among competing teams of experts.

But on what basis may they choose? If the questions that the experts debate among themselves are

fundamentally comprehensible by attentive laymen, “science” would be about mere detail and citizens would be able to decide the big questions on the basis of equality. But if the “science” by which the polity is ruled disposes of essential questions, then citizenship in the sense of Aristotle and of the American Founders is impossible, and the masses should be mere faithful subjects. And if some voters dig in their heels or place their faith in scientists who are out of step with “what science says”—quacks, by definition—then they undermine the very basis of government that rests on expertise. *Such inequality is compatible with some conceptions of citizenship, but not with the American or democratic versions thereof.*

Because Americans believe that “all men are created equal,” they tend to identify the concept of citizenship with that of self-government; the American commitment to equality means equality in the making of laws. Even more, it presumes laws under which persons may live as they wish, that the people have the final say on any restriction of that freedom, and that even popular assent—never mind scientific decision-making—cannot alienate the rights to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Unlike Hegel and Napoleon, who saw nations as organisms to be organized scientifically, Americans view public life as an arena of clashing interests that must be adjusted to their general satisfaction. Hence from the American perspective, removing the polity’s business from the arena of politics to the cloisters of science just restricts the competition among the polity’s factions and changes its rules. Whereas previously the parties had to address the citizenry with substantive cases for their positions and interests, now translating those positions into scientific terms expressed by certified persons means that the factions must fight one another by marshaling contrasting scientific retinues, by validating their own and discrediting their opponents’ experts. It follows then that *the modern struggle is over control of the process of accreditation*, and that the arguments the masses hear must be mostly *ad hominem*, seldom *ad valorem*—not least because the experts deem the masses incapable and unworthy of hearing anything else.

Franklin Roosevelt’s “New Deal” revolutionized the relationship between ordinary Americans and their government by introducing a new kind of legislation: thenceforth, the people’s elected representatives would delegate to “independent” executive agencies the “quasi-legislative” and “quasi-judicial” power to invent and administer the rules in their

field by which people would live. The citizen's recourses against these powers are mostly theoretical. The notion that they are "independent" and rule by impartial expertise is on the level of stories about tooth fairies.

Scientific Pretense Comes to America

AMERICA GOT ITS FIRST straight dose of scientific governance in the 1950s. In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court decided the case of *Brown v. Board of Education*—whether schools segregated by race fulfilled the 14th Amendment's requirement for

courts and the "independent agencies" took them over. Beginning in the 1970s, courts and agencies began to take control of economic life through the pretense of scientific environmental management. In *Massachusetts v. EPA* (2007), the Court agreed with what it called predominant scientific opinion that human emissions of carbon dioxide cause "global warming" and hence ordered it to regulate those emissions—essentially America's economy. The American people's elected representatives had not passed and were not about to pass any law concerning "global warming." No matter.

It should be superfluous to point out that "scientific" briefs submitted to courts, as well as the innumerable contacts between expert "independent" agencies and the interest groups in the fields they regulate, are anything but impartial, bloodless, disinterested, apolitical. But in fact the power of scientific pretense rests largely on the thin veil it casts over clashes of interest and political identity. Let us look further.

In his 1960 Godkin lectures at Harvard, C. P. Snow, who had been Britain's civil service commissioner, told Americans that "In any advanced industrial society...the cardinal choices have to be made by a handful of men: in secret and, at least in legal form, by men who cannot have firsthand knowledge of what these choices depend upon or what their results may be." In short, public figures must be figureheads for scientists who are formally responsible to them but whose minds are beyond common understanding and scrutiny. Snow concluded that society's greatest need was for change, and that scientists were "socially imaginative minds." While scientists should not administer, he said, they should be part of the Establishment, along with administrators. He illustrated this point by contrasting the clash in Britain between two scientists, Sir Henry Tizard, innovative, progressive, and very much a member of the administrative-scientific Establishment, and F. A. Lindemann, a scientist close to Winston Churchill but outside the Establishment. According to Snow, Lindemann polluted science and administration with politics, while Tizard's contrary scientific and administrative opinions were supra-political. Tizard's membership in the Establishment made them that.

But in the same year, President Dwight Eisenhower's farewell to the American people after eight years in the White House and a lifetime in the U.S. Army argued that government's embrace of science would corrupt itself and science. Whereas Snow had

"equal protection of the laws" to all citizens—not by reference to any legal or political principle on which the general population might pronounce themselves (one such principle was available in Justice John Marshall Harlan's dissent in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the case that *Brown* overturned), but rather by reference to a "study" by sociologist Kenneth Clark concluding that "separate is inherently unequal." This was a finding supposedly of fact, not of law. Whereas ordinary citizens were supposedly competent to agree or disagree with the legal and moral principles on either side of these cases, the Court decided *Brown* on a basis that could be contested only by sociologists as well credentialed and funded as Mr. Clark. Debates within the Court and in society at large subsequently have been focused not so much on what is lawful as on contending studies about the effects of competing policies.

The scientization of American political life was just beginning. Between the 1950s and 2000 social policy slipped away from voter control because the



taken pains to identify science with public policy and to call true scientists only those who got along with colleagues and especially with administrators, Eisenhower pointed to these things as subversive. His oft-cited warning about the dangers of a “military-industrial complex” was part of the address’s larger point: the danger that big government poses to citizenship:

...a government contract becomes virtually a substitute for intellectual curiosity. For every old blackboard there are now hundreds of new electronic computers. The prospect of domination of the nation’s scholars by Federal employment, project allocations, and the power of money is ever present and is gravely to be regarded. Yet, in holding scientific research and discovery in respect, as we should, we must also be alert to the equal and opposite danger that public policy could itself become the captive of a scientific technological elite.

The prospect against which Eisenhower warned has become our time’s reality. One accedes to the rank of expert by achieving success in getting grants, primarily from the government. Anyone who has worked in a university knows that getting government grants is the surefire way to prestige and power. And on what basis do the government’s grantors make the grants that constitute the scientific credentials? Science itself? But the grantors are not scientists, and they would not be immune to human temptations even if they were. Personal friendship, which C. P. Snow touted, is not nearly as problematic as intellectual kinship, professional and political partisanship. In sum, as Eisenhower warned, politicians are tempted to cast issues of public policy in terms of science in order to foreclose debate, to bring to the side of their interests expert witnesses whose expertise they manufactured and placed beyond challenge.

Power by Pretense

TESTIFYING TO A JOINT CONGRESSIONAL committee on March 21, 2007, former vice president Al Gore argued for taxing the use of energy based on the combustion of carbon, and for otherwise forcing Americans to emit much less carbon dioxide. Gore wanted to spend a substantial amount of the money thus raised to fund certain business ventures. (Incidentally or not, he himself had a large

stake in those ventures.) But, he argued, his proposal was not political, and debating it was somehow illegitimate, because he was just following “science,” according to which, if these things were not done, Planet Earth would overheat and suffocate. He said: “The planet has a fever. If your baby has a fever, you go to the doctor. If the doctor says you need to intervene here, you don’t say, ‘Well, I read a science fiction novel that tells me it’s not a problem.’” But Gore’s advocacy of “solutions” for “global warming” was anything but politically neutral acceptance of expertise. As vice president until 2001, and afterward, he had done much to build a veritable industry of scientists and publicists who had spent some \$50 billion, mostly in government money, during the previous decade to turn out and publicize “studies” bolstering his party’s efforts to regulate and tax in specific ways. Moreover, he claimed enough scientific knowledge to belittle his opposition for following “science fiction.” But Gore’s work was political, not scientific. Not surprisingly, some of his opponents in Congress and among scientists thought that Gore and his favorite scientists were doing well-paid science fiction.

Who was right? Gore’s opponents, led by Oklahoma senator James Inhofe, argued that the substance of the two main questions, whether the Earth was being warmed by human activities, and what if anything could and should be done about it, should be debated before the grand jury of American citizens. Gore et al. countered that “the debate is over!” and indeed that nonscientific citizens had no legitimate place in the debate. Yet he and like-minded citizens claimed to know enough to declare that it had ended. They also claimed that scientists who disagreed with them, or who merely questioned the validity of the conclusions produced by countless government science commissions to which Gore and his followers



had funneled government money, and which they called “mainstream science,” were “deniers”—illegitimate. Equally out of place, they argued, were calls that they submit to tests of their scientific IQ. *Whatever else one may call this line of argument, one may not call it scientific. It belongs to the genus “politics.”* But, peculiarly, it is politics that aims to take matters out of the realm of politics, where citizens may decide by persuading one another, and places them in a realm where power is exercised by capturing the commanding heights of the Establishment.

Thus on July 28, 2008, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi explained to journalist David Rogers why she was right in forbidding Congress to vote on proposals by Republicans to open U.S. coastlines to oil drilling. Using fossil fuels, she explained, causes global warming. Forbidding votes that could result in more oil being used was her duty because, she said, “I’m trying to save the planet. I’m trying to save the planet.” No one would vouch for her scientific expertise. But she was surely saving an item in the agenda of her party’s constituencies, which rightly feared defeat in open debates and votes.

In the same way, in September 2008 Secretary of the Treasury Henry Paulson and chairman of the Federal Reserve Board Ben Bernanke told Congress and the country, backed by many in the banking business, that unless Congress authorized spending \$700 billion to purchase the financial assets that the banks and investment houses considered least valuable, the entire financial system would collapse and the American people would lose their savings, jobs, homes, and so on, and that authorizing that money would avert the crisis. But none of those who proposed the expenditure explained why the failure of some large private enterprises and their subsequent sale at public auction would cause any of the above-mentioned catastrophes. There was no explanation of how the money would be spent, how the assets to be bought would be valued, or why. The arguments were simply statements by experts in government as well as finance—whose repeated mistakes had brought about the failures that were at the center of contention, and whose personal interests were involved in the plan they proposed. The strength of their arguments lay solely in the position of those making them. They were the ones who were supposed to know. And when, a month later, the same Paulson, backed by the same unanimous experts, told the country that the \$700 billion would be spent otherwise, and as they committed some \$8 trillion

somehow to shore up the rest of the economy, the arguments continued to lie in the position of those making them, combined with the clamor of those who would benefit directly from the government’s outlays. In practice, expertise—or science—has come to be defined by a government job or commission. Truth and error are incidental.

The confluence of political agendas with the attempt to describe political choices as scientific rather than political, and the attempt to delegitimize opponents as out of step with science, is clear in the 2005 book by journalist Chris Mooney, *The Republican War on Science*. Typically, Mooney disclaims substantive scientific judgment and claims

Caught in the confluence of corporate interests and conservative ideology, Republicans have “skewed science” on every important question of the day, from stem cell research to “global warming, mercury pollution, condom effectiveness, the alleged health risks of abortion, and much else.”

only the capacity and right to discern the “credibility” of rival scientists and their claims. Note well, however, that propositions or persons are credible—that is, worth believing—only to the extent that they are correct substantively. Arguments such as Mooney’s, Paulson’s, Pelosi’s, and Gore’s most certainly aim to convince citizens about certain substantive propositions, but—and this is key—they do so indirectly, by pretending that they find certain propositions credible and others not. Credible are the ones of which they approve, coming from persons the places of which they approve: the government bureaucracies or universities. Judgments of authoritative provenance, they argue, need not refute the opposition’s arguments, or even refer to their substance because science—meaning the Establishment—supposedly has settled the arguments intellectually to its own satisfaction, the only satisfaction that matters.

Mooney writes that because “American democracy...relies heavily on scientific technical expertise to function [public officials] need to rely on

the best scientific knowledge available and proceed on the basis of that knowledge to find solutions." Modern Republicans, he argues, have put themselves "in stark contrast with both scientific information and dispassionate, expert analysis in general." Caught in the confluence of corporate interests and conservative ideology, primarily religion, Republicans have "skewed science" on every important question of the day, from stem cell research to "global warming, mercury pollution, condom effectiveness, the alleged health risks of abortion, and much else." They have "cherry picked" facts and, most ominously, even cited scientists to back them up. Mooney worries: "If the American people come to believe they can find a scientist willing to say anything, they will grow increasingly disillusioned with science itself."

Against the Grain

THAT WORRY IS SERIOUS. Convincing people that what you may teach your children, what taxes you should pay, must be decided by the "scientific" pronouncements of members of a certain class challenges the American concept of popular government all too directly. To succeed, any attempt to impose things so contrary to American life must overcome political hurdles as well as human nature itself.

Government by scientific pretense runs against the grain of politics in two ways: First, since those who would rule by scientific management eschew arguments on the substance of the things, instead relying on the cachet of the scientists whose mere servants they pretend to be, their success depends on maintaining a pretense of substantive neutrality on the issues—the pretense that if "science" were to pronounce itself in the other direction, they would follow with the same alacrity. But this position is impossible to maintain against the massive evidence that those who hawk certain kinds of social or environmental policies in the name of science are first of all partisans of those policies, indeed that these policies are part of the identity of their socio-political class.

Second, it is inherently difficult for anyone who fancies himself a citizen to hear from another that he is not qualified to disagree with a judgment said to be scientific. Naturally, he will ask: If I as a layman don't know enough to disagree, what does that other layman know that qualifies him to agree? Could it be that his appeal to science is just another way of tell-

ing me to shut up because he is better than I, and that he is justifying his presumption by pointing to his friends in high places?

The most important claims made on behalf of science often run against human nature, none more so than its central claim about the nature of humanity. On December 20, 2005, deciding the case of *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District*, federal district court judge James Jones prohibited the Dover, Pennsylvania, schools from teaching the *possibility* that human beings are the result not of chance but of "intelligent design." To partisan applause, he ruled that science had shown, proved, that all life, including human life, is the result of chance, that it is meaningless, that entertaining the possibility of the opposite is religion, and that doing so in a public school amounts to the "establishment of religion," and hence is prohibited by the First Amendment. Leave aside the absurdity of maintaining that the authors of the U.S. Constitution entertained any part of this reasoning. Consider: since everyone knows that nobody really *knows* how life, particularly human life, came about (cf. the legal meaning of the word "knowledge"), any attempt to impose as official truth the counterintuitive proposition that human life is meaningless discredits itself. It is impossible to suppress the natural reaction: "How the hell do *they* know?"

Human nature rebels especially violently against those who pretend to special knowledge but who then prove inept, whose prescriptions bring misery. When politicians lay out their reasons why something should or should not be done, when the public accepts those reasons, and then the ensuing measures bring grief, the public's anger is tempered by its own participation in the decision, and is poured out on the ideas themselves as well as on the politicians who espoused them. But when the politicians make big changes in economic and social life on the basis of "science" beyond the people's capacity to understand, when events show them to have been wrong, when those changes impoverish and degrade life, then popular anger must crash its full force only on those who made themselves solely responsible. The failed sorcerers' apprentices' excuse "science made me do it" will only add scorn to retribution. ❁

Angelo M. Codevilla is professor of international relations at Boston University. This essay is adapted from the second edition of his *The Character of Nations*, forthcoming from Basic Books.

Copyright of American Spectator is the property of American Spectator and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.