

# KETTERING REVIEW

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A journal of ideas and activities dedicated to improving  
the quality of public life in the American democracy

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# Scientific Authority and the Democratic Narrative

by Jason Blakely

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*Deliberating over public policy requires identifying the moral weight and meaning—and indeed the broadest possible consequences—of certain actions.*

**I**n the second book of his enduring study of the early republic, *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville began his discussion of what he called “the influence of democracy on the action of intellect in the United States” by noting the distinctive tendency of the individual to appeal to the “exercise of his own understanding alone.” Practical and pragmatic, trusting in the authority of their senses, thinking like good Cartesians without having read Descartes, Americans, Tocqueville continued, “readily conclude that everything in the world may be explained, and that nothing in it transcends the limits of the understanding.” Such self-reliance, he believed, was laudable in many respects, but it had an obvious, and potentially dangerous, corollary: Americans “fall to denying what they cannot comprehend.”

Mostly what Jacksonian-era Americans denied, according to Tocqueville, was “whatever is extraordinary” and “whatever is supernatural.” He noted as well that Americans were as respectful of learning, the fine arts, and science as one might expect of a pragmatic, commercially oriented people, even if the practical and applied sciences counted for more to them than the theoretical ones. Following Tocqueville’s lead, one might argue that Americans for the most part have long maintained a tempered respect for the authority of science, an attitude that has generally contributed to the country’s material progress and well-being.

That attitude has recently been tested. On a range of issues—from climate change and

vaccination to evolution and nutrition—America now teems with popular movements whose central aim is the rejection of one or another scientific finding or position. COVID-19 has further dramatized these tensions, driving antipathies between scientific experts and the sundry movements commonly referred to as “populist” out onto the streets.

Many of the protests in spring 2020 brought together a strange mix of citizens united by their rejection of measures recommended by medical scientists to curb the spread of the disease. This assortment of the discontented included conservative operatives, suburban entrepreneurs, paramilitarized nationalists, unemployed wage workers, and anti-vaxxers. One of the enduring images from those early days of the pandemic was a photograph taken in Denver of a lockdown protestor, in a star-spangled shirt, hanging out the window of a Dodge truck (a “Land of the Free” sign draped over the passenger-side door), staring down a medical worker in full scrubs and surgical mask standing in silent counterprotest in the middle of the road. The image struck a chord, circulating widely as a symbol of the confrontation between populist anger and scientific authority.

The same confrontation was also evident in conservative media. In a highly controversial series of posts, *First Things* magazine editor Rusty Reno exceeded his own usual hyperbole to denounce public health recommendations on curtailing business and all kinds of assembly, including religious services. “We live in a technocratic social order,” Reno fumed, condemning an “expert class . . . [that] impose[s] draconian measures of restriction and control.” Reno went on to quote the Italian philosopher

Giorgio Agamben, who has argued that the pandemic exposes the tendency of modern societies to value nothing more than “bare life” and “survival.”

But in subsequent weeks, the tension between surviving the coronavirus and other rival goods triggered an equally powerful reaction from the American left. This came dramatically to the fore after the murder of George Floyd and the mass mobilization of huge numbers of Black Lives Matter protestors across the country. In a stark contrast with their earlier rebuke of right-wing populists for flouting public health guidelines, many health professionals now seemed to countenance a less restrictive approach to social distancing and public assembly. In early June 2020, more than 1,200 health and medical experts signed a letter maintaining their opposition to a “permissive stance on all gatherings, particularly protests against stay-home orders,” but cited the “pervasive and lethal force of white supremacy” as an overriding threat to the “health specifically of black people”—and thus as justification for public protests.





In a widely cited follow-up piece in the *Atlantic*, Julia Marcus of Harvard Medical School and Gregg Gonslaves of the Yale School of Public Health reasoned that epidemiologists must “maximize the health of a population across all aspects of life,” arguing that “the health implications of maintaining the status quo of white supremacy” were “too grave to ignore, even with the potential for an increase in coronavirus transmission.”

To observers on the right, such responses only intensified the sense that scientific authority was being politicized in favor of some causes and not others. A representative response was voiced by *Hillbilly Elegy* author J.D. Vance, who remarked on how the “moral scolding ceased as soon as elite-favored protests began taking place.” The result, according to Vance, would be a further erosion of “trust in our country’s experts.”

More recently, some public health specialists have also expressed discomfort at what appear to be conflicting standards. As Nicholas Christakis, a Yale professor specializing in biosocial

science, told the *New York Times* in summer of 2020, “We allowed thousands of people to die alone. We buried people by Zoom. Now all of a sudden we are saying, never mind?”

How did we arrive at this crisis of scientific authority? And is there a way to repair the damaged relationship between democratic deliberation and science?

### **The Problem of Popular Revolt**

Grappling with the problem of popular revolt against scientific authority in the United States requires first distinguishing among different sources of the conflict. As historians have long known, much of the country’s exceptionally fierce antiscientific sentiment is attributable to certain peculiar cultural traditions. Works like Richard Hofstadter’s *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* and Susan Jacoby’s *The Age of American Unreason* have established major sources of resistance to scientific expertise, including the practical-minded distaste for theoretical reflection that Tocqueville noted in the nineteenth century, as well as forms of religious fundamentalism that acknowledge no authority beyond the truths revealed in sacred texts.

These traditional currents of resistance to scientific authority are likely to persist. Darwin’s theory of evolution remains generally secure in American public schools, but creationist and intelligent design alternatives continue to be on offer in fundamentalist religious schools and colleges. While these currents sometimes support and coalesce with the more recent and broader revolt against scientific and intellectual authority, they do not explain the more complex and partially justifiable reasons for the current populist backlash.

As I argue in my recent book, *We Built Reality*, much of the confusion surrounding scientific authority in modern society stems from either the exercise of fraudulent scientific expertise or the extension of scientific authority into areas where it does not belong. In particular, specialist claims of scientific authority in

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## Is there a way to repair the damaged relationship between democratic deliberation and science?

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matters of governance and social organization have come to be seen by more and more Americans as a bid for power by elite cliques contemptuous of the broader public. Furthermore, there is a connection between this dubious use of scientific authority (which is often based on research that violates the best practices of science or social science) to much that has gone wrong in contemporary America from excessive regulations and financial crashes to militarized and racialized policing, to overly biological and medicalized understandings of happiness and love, and even to scientific polling and surveys that misread the real needs and inclinations of American citizens.

Consider the 2008 financial crisis. Although most economists did not foresee it, many of them played a decisive role in encouraging the behavior and practices that ultimately brought on the recession, even to the point of denying the existence of a housing bubble and advising Americans to continue investing in real estate.

That such advice was proffered in terms of a supposedly neutral and predictive economic science (drawing on the allegedly rigorous approach of the dominant neoclassical paradigm) only deepened popular suspicions of number-crunching, model-building elites who were supposed to know better.

Indeed, one of the chief findings of the Dahlem Report, written by a group of economists uneasy with the neoclassical paradigm, was that their profession played a central role in generating the 2008 crisis by making exaggerated claims about the precision and scientific rigor of economic models and theories. Economists and financial gurus had bolstered unwarranted confidence in housing markets and complex financial products (including the infamous toxic assets), thereby inspiring forms of economic exuberance that accelerated the collapse.

The political ramifications of that disaster are well known. While ordinary Americans experienced life-altering losses of wealth, unpopular policies—often championed by the same experts who had contributed to the mess—



were enacted to bail out banks and financial institutions that economists deemed “too big to fail” (minimizing the losses of those in the upper economic strata, including most bankers). Not surprisingly, this targeted bailout helped energize both the Occupy Wall Street and Tea

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## The facts of how a disease spreads remain philosophically distinct from the question of how we ought to respond as a people.

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Party movements. As the journalist Chris Hedges, a prominent voice in the Occupy Wall Street movement, later observed, the regnant economic theorists prescribed policy “on the basis of myth” and ideology, not science.

The problem here is the abuse of scientific authority in what are clearly self-interested ways—a problem that is closely related to an even more fundamental misuse or misunderstanding of science known as scientism. A recurrent tendency in modern cultures, from the positivism of Auguste Comte to the reductionist zeal of many contemporary neo-Darwinians, scientism is the promotion of an excessive faith in the power of science to provide authoritative answers to, ultimately, everything, including all questions bearing on truth, meaning, right, and wrong. While repeatedly batted down by critics, including many thoughtful scientists and philosophers, the specter of scientism has

returned time and again in modernity, making overstated claims that bedazzle the credulous while heightening the suspicions of those who think the experts are going far beyond sound science and weaving just-so stories to advance personal, professional, or political agendas.

Scientism is clearly a political problem today—and the popular suspicions aroused by it are not merely the product of intellectual error, ignorance, or religious principle, though the present populist backlash has contributed to an alarmingly widespread attraction to outlandish conspiracy theories. More routinely, though, the dubious uses of scientific authority in public policy debates make more and more citizens feel excluded from the democratic process—rejected on the grounds of ignorance, stupidity, or general deplorability.

Americans today desperately need a way to discern the rightful role of scientific authority within the practices of democratic policy and deliberation—both for the sake of democratic legitimacy and of science itself. What are the proper limits of scientific expertise? And how do we decide when to follow the scientists and when instead to allow for the messy free play of democratic deliberation and contest?

### **Deliberating over Science**

Several factors have exacerbated the present clash between democracy and science. One is the declining quality of science education and the failure to instill in citizens a basic understanding of what science can and cannot do. Such failures are evident in the skirmishes and legal battles over the approach to evolutionary science in public school classrooms—as in *Kitzmiller v. Dover*, a high-profile 2005 case

determining whether or not a Pennsylvania school district could require the teaching of intelligent design.

There is also the long-standing problem of communicating science's provisional character to a broader public. Specifically, scientists often have difficulty explaining that their discoveries are authoritative without being absolute. While science may provide a reasonable working picture of what is the case in the physical and biological worlds, this picture nonetheless remains contingent and open to revision. Unfortunately, this lack of absolute certainty can in turn be exploited by skeptics, amateurs, hacks, and ideologues who have their own special interests in mind.

But scientists, in turn, must also learn to better recognize the authority of democracy. A widespread failure to respect both the rightful domain of science and its clear limitations has been an important factor in the intensity of the clashes between populists and scientists over the

pandemic. In particular, genuine expertise in an area like epidemiology is too often expanded into authority over laws and public policy more generally. But the facts of how a disease spreads, for example, remain philosophically distinct from the question of how we ought to respond as a people—what goods ought to be valued, what sacrifices made, and what policies enacted.

Epidemiologists and other health officials should obviously be heeded on such matters as the origins and transmission of the coronavirus, risk factors, and the treatments and possible cures for COVID-19. The public should also respect what health officials have to say about practices that are likely (even if not always certain) to prevent the spread of the disease, including the wearing of masks and social distancing.

For laypeople to challenge epidemiologists on the science of such matters is dangerous and ultimately self-destructive (as is evident in the rising infection and fatality rates in the United States). Unfortunately, the irresponsible promotion of science denialism, alternative views, and conspiracy theories by opportunistic politicians and media figures, mostly on the American right, has only encouraged the spread of a deeply irrational and indefensible strain of anti-intellectualism. We are in deep trouble when people buy into unfounded and simply erroneous notions, whether it's that COVID-19 is milder than the flu, or that it will suddenly and magically disappear, or that it has some kind of secret, esoteric origins unknown to working epidemiologists.

Nonetheless, for all the dangers this populism poses, it should make us consider why there has been such a loss of trust in science and scientific authority. Populists are not wrong in



thinking that too much political decision-making today is dominated by cliques of ruling experts and lifted out of the sphere of public deliberation and concern. Too often, law and public policy are treated as the special domain of a small group of managers and wonks, speaking their specialist jargons and invoking their infallible metrics. But public policy is never the exclusive domain of scientific or technocratic knowledge. Maybe even more importantly, policymaking involves telling stories about what is politically and ethically significant. In fashioning the governing narratives of a democracy, the voice of science can be only one of many voices.

That point holds true from the simplest to the most technical public policies. Public plans and projects are always shaped and guided by a narrative complete with heroes and villains, backstories and subplots. Wars, infrastructure, regulatory laws, policing strategies—these are



crisis, this involves interpreting the significance of preventing the spread of the virus in balance with consideration of other public goods—including those of racial equality, education, livelihood, mental health, familial ties, and religious commitments, among many others.

Public health experts often helpfully inform citizens as to the technicalities of various findings and options, but the content or significance of the overall story that determines action should be the product of democratic dialogue and contestation. Although policy analysts and health experts are essential in informing the public about the various options, ordinary citizens retain a say in what story to tell about a given challenge or problem. Indeed, when it comes to the stories informing public policy in a democracy, scientists and nonscientists, experts and laypeople, must be on equal footing. Any claim to absolute authority over public policy by any group of experts is an illegitimate power grab.

This more interpretive and democratic approach requires that public health experts and analysts avoid the temptation to present themselves as having special insight or a greater say over what is ultimately the right policy. During

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## No specialist scientific knowledge can determine what goals are ultimately worthy or unworthy of sacrifice.

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born only within a narrative field, animated by some overarching notion of what is worthy. Deliberating over public policy therefore requires identifying the moral weight and meaning—and indeed the broadest possible consequences—of certain actions. In the case of the COVID-19

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the current pandemic, public health experts such as Marcus and Gonsalves unfortunately succumbed to that temptation, invoking their ability to “maximize the health of the population across all aspects of life” in order to determine which causes justified risking infection and death and which did not. One may agree with Marcus

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## Democracy and science can be mutually reinforcing only if there is a recognition of the limited authority of each.

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and Gonsalves’s support for Black Lives Matter (as I do), but there is a real political danger in justifying actions in support of the cause on speciously scientific grounds. No specialist scientific knowledge can determine what goals are ultimately worthy or unworthy of sacrifice.

The ironic effect of technocratic overreach is to discredit the real scientific expertise that public health specialists have to offer. Without always being able to articulate why, ordinary citizens feel that experts are unfairly excluding them from the political process. No longer will-

ing to learn from the experts, they fall prey to various forms of pseudoscience and quackery—abandoning that fundamental wariness of “whatever is extraordinary” that Tocqueville lauded in early-nineteenth-century Americans.

Democracy and science can be mutually reinforcing only if there is a recognition of the limited authority of each. Just as science is not the determiner of questions of self-governance and ethical sources shaping our culture, so democratic acclaim should not be the basis for the validity of the findings of science. In the face of a daunting global pandemic (and other immediately pressing threats such as climate change), citizens’ concerns about racial justice, livelihoods, education, religious observance, mental health, or other goods cannot be dismissed as having less standing or being less urgent simply because they cannot be validated through scientific testing and formulation. In the narrative that is constantly shaping a democratic society, and being shaped by it, the various voices advancing various goods must be given a fair hearing even if as a people we determine, provisionally, that some goods take precedence over others. The future of democracy rests on whether we learn to tell—and to live—the right stories together.

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