

The End of the Age of Scientism

66

41

Save



A student drinks from a water fountain at an elementary school in California on Sept. 20, 2023. AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez



By Jeffrey A. Tucker

11/29/2024

Updated: 11/29/2024

A A Print

Commentary

Communities around the United States are right now debating fluoride in the water. It's a bit of a shock because the issue has been present in

the underground of American political life for many decades. It was an early example of using public services for purposes of mass medicalization. The science was never there, however, and there is growing awareness that the critics were always correct. If you want fluoride, you can get your own, without mass dosing of the population

Share without consent.



's the strangest thing. This issue became real all at once, seemingly one day to the next, even though it has been debated as far back as the 1950s. One could say it is an issue whose time has come.



and not only this one. There is new skepticism in the public mind about a huge range of sciency things the critics of which were only recently considered crazy cranks. The frenzy over the capacity of



government to control the climate is meeting with new resistance. Governments and companies that imposed vaccine mandates are

incising serious fines at the hands of court judgments. Legions of regime scientists are under fire for blessing pandemic-era lockdowns despite how much they harmed the population.

Only two years ago, Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., founder of Children's Health Defense, was written off as a conspiracy theorist. Only one problem: his theories not only came true but his explanations contained in two long and heavily cited books are enormously compelling, so much so that his following has grown to a real turning point. People ask if he can be confirmed as the new Secretary of Health and Human Services. My own sense is that there is no doubt.

The new head of the National Institutes of Health is Jay Bhattacharya, who dissented against lockdowns from the earliest days, tirelessly writing and speaking against the misuse of science in the name of controlling infectious disease. In the darkest times, we were on the phone and he said to me with genuine conviction that we had the moral obligation to speak out because so many people were suffering. He had the genuine sense that this craziness had to end else society itself would be irreparably damaged.

Here we are nearly five years later and his outlook has become an emergent orthodoxy. It's but another symbol of dramatically changed times. We find daily articles in the mainstream press sounding alarms that there is extant a new populist movement that distrusts all the claims of science. It's a wild exaggeration. It is consistent with censorship and the dogma of supposed experts. Good science is characterized by doubts and demands for evidence.

In the bigger picture, conventional historiography divides the last millennium and a half into two great epochs: the age of faith and the age of science. This division was always overwrought. It imagines the culture from 500 to 1500 AD as mostly enraptured with mystical religious dogma and lorded over by popes and priests. Then the Enlightenment dawned with its focus on evidence and the scientific method and thus did we experience the dawn of technology and better lives.

There are some obvious correctives to make to this simple outlook. The "age of faith" was the very one that gave birth to scientific concerns, driven as they were in the Middle Ages by a confidence that the universe as created by God could be discovered and understood with fearless investigation. This was the essence of the scholasticism that emerged out of the 12th century which combined Christian, Jewish, Islamic, and classical wisdom with a drive to find pointers to the final truth in God himself.

Meanwhile, the birth of widespread secularism led to excess in the name of science such as terrifying eugenics (the belief that the human population should be bred with attention to quality such as found in animal husbandry) and totalitarianism (the belief that the whole of society should be treated as a laboratory for experiments). The number one mystical belief of the age of science was that the methods of the natural sciences can and should pertain to social sciences.

This key error wrecked so many different fields from politics to economics to psychology and sociology. The attempt to force fit methods for studying stable things for studying rational and volatile things never worked. To make it plausible required building fallacy

into the model. We see this everywhere now. Look up common fallacies to see the very core of junk science that overwhelms us today.

I've written about many, not only *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* but the subject bias. Then you have the absolute junk science of modeling: assume pigs can fly and you can prove it.

Looking back, the most powerful and prescient critique of this outlook was F.A. Hayek's amazing "[Counterrevolution of Science](#)," a book I revisited in the depth of lockdowns to find insight into what had gone wrong.

This is the 50th anniversary of Hayek's Nobel Prize speech of 1974. He had received the prize for his work on business cycles. He could have delivered a technical and relatively non-controversial talk. Instead he used the occasion to send out a grave warning not only to all economists but to everyone in academia and the intellectual world. Provocatively, he called his paper "[The Pretense of Knowledge](#)."

"What I mainly wanted to bring out by the topical illustration is that certainly in my field, but I believe also generally in the sciences of man, what looks superficially like the most scientific procedure is often the most unscientific, and, beyond this, that in these fields there are definite limits to what we can expect science to achieve. This means that to entrust to science—or to deliberate control according to scientific principles—more than scientific method can achieve may have deplorable effects.

"The progress of the natural sciences in modern times has of course so much exceeded all expectations that any suggestion that there may be some limits to it is bound to arouse suspicion. Especially all those will resist such an insight who have hoped that our increasing power of prediction and control, generally regarded as the characteristic result of scientific advance, applied to the processes of society, would soon enable us to mould society entirely to our liking.

"It is indeed true that, in contrast to the exhilaration which the discoveries of the physical sciences tend to produce, the insights which we gain from the study of society more often have a dampening

effect on our aspirations; and it is perhaps not surprising that the more impetuous younger members of our profession are not always prepared to accept this. Yet the confidence in the unlimited power of science is only too often based on **a false belief that the scientific method consists in the application of a ready-made technique, or in imitating the form rather than the substance of scientific procedure, as if one needed only to follow some cooking recipes to solve all social problems** [my emphasis]. It sometimes almost seems as if the techniques of science were more easily learnt than the thinking that shows us what the problems are and how to approach them.

“The conflict between what in its present mood the public expects science to achieve in satisfaction of popular hopes and what is really in its power is a serious matter because, even if the true scientists should all recognize the limitations of what they can do in the field of human affairs, so long as the public expects more there will always be some who will pretend, and perhaps honestly believe, that they can do more to meet popular demands than is really in their power. It is often difficult enough for the expert, and certainly in many instances impossible for the layman, to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate claims advanced in the name of science ...”

He concludes his talk as follows:

“If man is not to do more harm than good in his efforts to improve the social order, he will have to learn that in this, as in all other fields where essential complexity of an organized kind prevails, **he cannot acquire the full knowledge which would make mastery of the events possible** [my emphasis]. He will therefore have to use what knowledge he can achieve, not to shape the results as the craftsman shapes his handiwork, but rather to cultivate a growth by providing the appropriate environment, in the manner in which the gardener does this for his plants. There is danger in the exuberant feeling of ever growing power which the advance of the physical sciences has engendered and which tempts man to try, “dizzy with success”, to use a characteristic phrase of early communism, to subject not only our natural but also our human environment to the control of a human will.

“The recognition of the insuperable limits to his knowledge ought indeed to teach the student of society a lesson of humility which should guard him against becoming an accomplice in men’s fatal striving to control society—a striving which makes him not only a tyrant over his fellows, but which may well make him the destroyer of a civilization which no brain has designed but which has grown from the free efforts of millions of individuals.”

There we go, words spoken half a century ago never more applicable than in our time. We seem to be learning. We seem to be applying the lesson. The only way to save science from itself is to apply it in proper ways while recognizing the limits of the ability to construct the world according to the imaginings of a handful of intellectuals. It’s tragic we had to come to the point of nearly destroying the globe to discover this but here we are. Let the rebuilding begin.

Keep the real science, but throw out the scientism.

Views expressed in this article are opinions of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Epoch Times.

Sign up for the News Alerts newsletter. You’ll get the biggest developing stories so you can stay ahead of the game. [Sign up with 1-click >>](#)



Jeffrey A. Tucker

Author

Jeffrey A. Tucker is the founder and president of the Brownstone Institute and the author of many thousands of articles in the scholarly and popular press, as well as 10 books in five languages, most recently “Liberty or Lockdown.” He is also the editor of “The Best of Ludwig von Mises.” He writes a daily column on economics for The Epoch Times and speaks widely on the topics of economics, technology, social philosophy, and culture.



[WEBSITE](#)

Author’s Selected Articles

The Bad Science of Absinthe History

Nov 28, 2024



It's Wool Blanket Time

Nov 27, 2024



The Peanut Gallery Is a Blast!

Nov 27, 2024



Economics Will Be the Real Challenge

Nov 26, 2024

