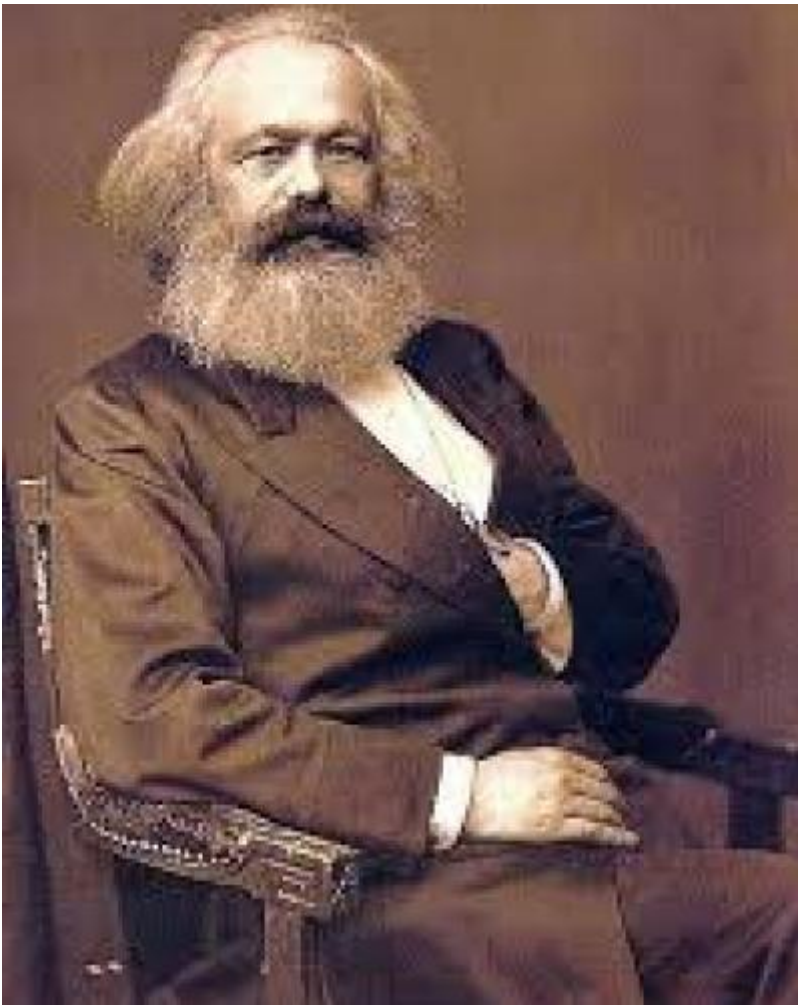


Covid-19: The denial of science has long and deep roots in U.S. culture



By Charles McKelvey

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In an article in The New York Times on March 27, Katherine Stewart writes that the hostility of the religious Right to science and its denial of scientific knowledge have obstructed the capacity of the United States to respond to the coronavirus pandemic. She maintains that the support of the religious Right was important in Trump's rise to power, and that Trump remains politically allied with religious ultraconservatives, who have rejected the recommendations of professional specialists with respect to the pandemic, as they previously rejected the warnings of scientists concerning the environment. She maintains that as a result of science denialism, combined with free-market ideology (which also has had the support of the religious Right), the nation has to face the pandemic without a sufficient testing capacity and without sufficient protective gear for health care workers. She maintains that February 2020 will go down in history

as the month in which the United States, in contrast to other nations, failed to develop its mass testing capability.

However, the rejection of scientific knowledge is not a phenomenon that that pertains only to the religious Right. The rejection of science is deeply rooted in U.S. culture and history, because scientific knowledge, in certain of its dimensions, contradicts the interests of the powerful. This was the case, for example, with respect to climate change, in which corporations sought to discredit the insights of the environmental sciences, with consequences that are not yet known. A more fundamental example is the casting aside of the insights of Karl Marx by academic institutions. From 1844 to 1867, Marx formulated a critique of the

sciences of political-economy and history, which was at the same time a critique of philosophy. In essence, Marx formulated a comprehensive philosophical-historical-political-economic understanding of humanity, written from the vantage point of the industrial worker, based in empirical observation. But Marx's scientific advance was a threat to the industrialists, who used their profits to fund universities, which would develop structures of knowledge and epistemological assumptions that negated and denied Marx's achievement. The universities fragmented what Marx saw as an integrated whole, developing the distinct disciplines of philosophy, history, political science, sociology, and anthropology; all guided by the epistemological premises of ethical neutrality and value-freedom, which constructed a barrier between the academic disciplines and the social movements formed by the people. These social movements would forge their own advances in understanding rooted in Marx's premises, insights not seen by academics, who would be confined to an ivory tower created by their false epistemological assumptions.

The U.S educational system fell into the logic of bureaucracy. The disciplines were organized into departments, and the professors in the different departments read different scientific literatures and belonged to different scientific associations. The capacity to scientifically analyze the whole disappeared. At the same time, the universities came to assume a particular bureaucratic function in the society, that of providing individuals with credentials that enabled them to enter certain professions. The university was not valued in the society for its capacity to impart knowledge; rather, it became useful for the individual quest for jobs and income. The universities adapted to this economic function, eventually marketing themselves on their capacity to confer degrees that gave their graduates employment advantages. The professors groused in faculty lounges concerning this situation, but they rarely challenged the structures that were its foundation. In the end, the universities themselves debased the knowledge that their mission had called them to defend and promote. The universities, therefore, are implicated in the profound cultural disrespect for knowledge.

The adaptation of the universities to the requirements of capitalist bureaucracy implied the casting aside of philosophical questions. For it was the universities that ought to have defended knowledge and insisted on taking knowledge seriously. If they had done so simply on the basis of their credentials and degrees, they would have been dismissed as pompous and arrogant. To influence social norms, they would have had to defend knowledge on the basis of a reasonable explanation of the genuine sources of knowledge in, first, empirical observation, and secondly, theoretical reflection that takes into account vantage points that are rooted in the experiences of various social positions. Had they done so, they would have disseminated an appreciation of the process through which knowledge is attained as well as respect for the conclusions attained through this process. In the absence of scientific understanding of understanding, cultural relevance and post-modernism emerged, reinforcing the collective uncertainty concerning how we can know the true and the right.

Reflecting and alongside the profound cultural rejection of scientific knowledge, politicians have modeled an approach that sets aside appreciation of knowledge, science, and intellectual work. Rather than presenting themselves as learned man and women, seeking to lead the people by educating them to a more mature political understanding, they seek to echo the prevailing limited understandings that exist among the people with respect to various problems, often using opinion surveys to assist in framing a politically effective discourse. Moreover, when a Congressman is obligated to cast a vote on a proposed policy with respect to some country or region of the world, they do not seek to educate themselves, prior to casting their vote, concerning the history and politics of the country or region in question. It is only necessary that they are able to defend their vote before an equally uninformed public.

A recent example is a tweet by Mara Tekach, the chargé d'affaires of the U.S. embassy in Havana. She expressed the U.S. desire for the protection of human rights and freedom of expression in Cuba, without

appreciation for the characteristics of the Cuban political system. She reiterates a policy toward a particular nation that is not based on an obligation to seek to understand the logic and the rationale of its political-economic, convinced that, in spite of the lack of knowledge of her superiors, they know best what the people of Cuba need.

Who is responsible for this widespread depreciation of science, made manifest in various forms? We all are, but especially academics, who have accommodated to the demands of capitalist bureaucracy, rather than insisting that no society can be sustained if it systematically ignores the insights that that society has the capacity to discover. We should not blame the religious Right, who at least are trying to make sense of the world in the context of a nation that has not formulated a meaningful and scientifically informed narrative, a situation for which the religious Right is not responsible.

And we should not ignore the issue of social prestige. Academics at prestigious universities, who themselves did not assume the duty that their privileges assigned, speak with disdain toward people who never will see the inside of an Ivy League classroom. The conservative mood is driven, in part, by this elite arrogance. As Ronald Brownstein writes in *The Atlantic*, conservatives feel that the experts pertain to an elite that looks down on the less-educated and less-fortunate; a self-serving elite whose version of the truth cannot be trusted.

Those who have been excluded from privileges have formulated an understanding on the basis of their own experiences, without the respectful guidance of those who could have and ought to have brought them to a more enlightened and politically mature understanding. Now they are rejected again, their sincere efforts to formulate an understanding, based on their convictions and experiences, dismissed by the privileged.

To be sure, the rejection of science by the religious Right is mistaken. But the error is more our fault, than theirs. A discourse that blames the religious Right for the tragedy that the nation now faces is not going to convert the Right to a more mature understanding. Even if members of the religious Right do not read *The New York Times*, they know of the disdainful attitudes toward them contained in its pages. A discourse of this kind can only exacerbate the profound cultural and political national divide.

No one in the United States, no institution or person, has the necessary moral authority to lead the nation toward that consensus necessary for confronting any national challenge, such as that posed by the pandemic. Not the Trump administration, nor the Republican Party, nor the Democratic Party, nor the political establishment, nor the so-called Left, nor the media, nor the churches, nor the medical establishment, nor the scientific establishment, nor the academic establishment. Perhaps sectors of the medical, scientific, and academic establishments that have been critical of irresponsible tendencies in recent years, combined with more the mature sector of the Left and the alternative media, could form an organization that would be capable of speaking with sufficient moral authority to guide the people toward consensus and responsible action in the face of the kind of threat that the pandemic represents as well as other threats to the future of humanity.

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