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**Commentary**  
**The Scientific Scandal of the 1980s**  
by  
Lloyd S. Etheredge

Good science is logically consistent with many supporting motivations, political and otherwise, at different levels. Just as the commitment to health and well-being of patients can drive medical research, so political commitments to real world impact can serve the cause of research and direct it to issues of human relevance and value. Consider in this context the anti-Nazi investigations of *The Authoritarian Personality* or efforts (ultimately successful) to persuade people of the irrationality of the nuclear arms race.

I interpret Tetlock's first-order question to be whether, in published articles, we are getting good science. If not, political motives may be part of the causal equation, and he cites several cases.

However, I also think it is informative to take a different approach. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that all individual articles pass Tetlock's test. Then let us move to a higher level and inventory the distribution of an entire body of literature. Are there fair-minded and rigorous evaluations of the full range of theories that have political supporters or consequences? At this higher level, there is cause for alarm.

## I. THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES

The archetypal problem of politicized science is illustrated in the children's story

Emperor's New Clothes played out in the scientific community - the silence of national scientific institutions. The most glaring recent American case is the decade-long decision by American national scientific institutions to give a free ride to Reaganomics and related Republican ideas about economic policy and political psychology.

The clue to this collective silence, as in the Sherlock Holmes story *Silver Blaze*, is that the dog did not bark. The *prima facie* evidence for the indictment of political deference is the articles that did not appear, the channels of funding that dried up - and (if we investigate further) the behind-closed-doors concurrence of key scientific leaders to block the lines of inquiry they perceived to be potentially unsettling to Republicans.

To establish a baseline, recall that during the 1960s, and into the 1970s, the advance of social science seemed to be on track. We made steady progress in the quasi-experimental analysis of public policies and the development of program evaluation methods. There was an open season on Democratic ideas; social scientists began to evaluate Great Society programs, sometimes to the discomfort of liberals.

Then, in the 1980s, the National Academy of Sciences began selectively to back off. The boldly advertised role of an earlier era remained: for example, a Commission to bring the knowledge, analytical tools, and methods of the behavioral and social sciences to bear upon the major challenges facing the nation in efforts to understand them and to assist in their solution; a committee on national indicators to initiate studies to improve the information on important public policy issues continued on the books (National Academy of Sciences, 1992, pp. 110-111).

But the dog did not bark - and it should have. Reagan Republicans openly launched a decade-long experiment to alter national modal personality to improve economic growth

(reduce dependency, increase self-confidence, and entrepreneurial motivation, etc.) Their clinical-seeming diagnosis and model of the American political system were openly discussed: a hierarchical, authority-relationship model of backward linkages in which changes in the public sphere could alter individual personality and motivation and encourage Americans to take responsibility, once again, for their own lives without having self-defeating dependency and moral decay induced by a benevolent and large government above us . . . Were his policies a deep insight into group psychology by a president who was uncommonly intuitive and gifted in playing his role in political drama? Or a hallucination? That was the empirical question.

But this extraordinary national psychology experiment encountered not a *whisper* of criticism from national scientific institutions. Not a *single* suggestion for improved national indicators to evaluate the experiment, assess and monitor the causal pathways, render the evidence of experience interpretable.

The institutional silence shouts for attention. Reaganomics was intensely controversial throughout the academic world. *Any* responsible and representative scientific body that honored a duty to present its most candid professional advice about national problems should have been straightforward and honest in recommending rigorous testing and evaluation of Republican ideas about political psychology - especially so by the late 1980s, when the gridlock of ideas and interests produced an impasse in economic policy as well as growing deficits of hundreds of billions of dollars whose interest charges, for decades, will be a drag on the ability to create a better future.

Regrettably, the National Academy of Sciences also crossed traditional boundaries during these years, lending its imprimatur, *de facto*, to kill funding for politically unsettling traditions. It created a decade-long commission to recommend national funding priorities

for the behavioral sciences - a leading edges Commission that killed the idea of evaluating Reaganomics (its co-chair later acknowledged the proposal would have been too politically controversial for the Academy to recommend) and promoted a more boring menu that, given the Academy's prestige, gate-keeping role, and overall example, was promptly adopted by other, equally evasive (but more vulnerable) foundations and government agencies.

Now we have exited the Republican-era experiments without vital summary data to help with an evaluation and interpretation. When Republicans return to power - one day, they will - the nation is perfectly positioned to have learned nothing and to repeat the same dreadful impasse. One could hope for a wiser, more responsible and more honest scientific Establishment.

## II. FORECASTS

Nor, gentle reader, is the battle won. I have before me a letter from the cochair of the leading edges" commission, R. Duncan Luce, predicting that the National Academy of Sciences panels will continue to be constrained and will not be permitted to recommend the testing of Republican ideas in the near-term, even if this project is supported by several of the most distinguished scientists in the country.

I hope Duncan Luce is wrong. But readers of this journal may wish to monitor the trends. And perhaps, if nothing is happening when this article appears, a cottage industry could form to develop the new measures of hierarchical imagery (based on adaptations of Cartwright, Loevinger, Stewart, and McClelland) to test key Republican ideas and lay the basis for genuine learning.

### III. EXPLANATIONS

What (and who) neutered the behavioral sciences during the 1980s is probably one of the most revealing lines of investigation about the relationships of our national institutions that could be undertaken. The results were accomplished skillfully and without any public fight. This may not be a reassuring picture, or easy to assemble, as it touches upon the inner fabric of the Establishment of that period: the ambitions of the National Academy of Sciences to create a national dominance hierarchy in the formation of national science policy (with itself at the summit); patterns of intra-elite accommodation and management of the behavioral sciences; the multibillion dollar agendas for Big Science that might go awry if Republican zealots decided to play hardball; the deep forces that generate and continue the hold of simple, repeating, ideological schema in public life: and much else.

At this point, let me comment about four theories.

#### 1. Innocence

Innocence is not a credible defense, as the National Academy of Sciences (and the National Science Foundation) declined, on several occasions during the 1980s, to advocate any rigorous evaluation of Republican ideas. For example, earlier in the 1980s I was invited to suggest ideas to the Luce Commission, and I contributed a conceptual paper recommending the evaluation of Reaganomics and other ideological ideas. (Readers of this journal may recall my 1984 paper, *President Reagan's Counseling*, that was part of the submission.)

Later in the 1980s, after President Bush's election, as the deficits mounted, I contacted the Academy staff to ask if they were ready to reconsider. I was invited to prepare a draft of a new conceptual paper for review. In it, I recommended that the Academy itself take the

initiative to solicit funds and develop new indicators that would test a full range of ideologically linked ideas. Competing designs would be solicited and, using the model of the famous Michelson-Morley experiment, datasets would be assembled that promised a definitive test.

However, the senior leadership of the National Academy of Sciences slammed the door, blocked the paper from distribution to scientists on its advisory committees, circulated a letter declaring that President Frank Press concurred in this action, created an unusually imaginative range of excuses and pejorative innuendo, and generally violated all principles of scientific due process to prevent the subject from being discussed. Subsequently, I became involved to assure, through correspondence with a relatively large  $N$  of members of the National Academy of Sciences, that its membership became aware of the issues before their next presidential election. The Democratic chairman of the Joint Economic Committee also became involved to assure that the choices were faced squarely.

It s a long story, but the senior leadership of the Academy did not act in innocence or ignorance, their assiduous efforts notwithstanding.

## 2. Bullying and Intimidation

A second theory alleges bullying and intimidation by Republicans, especially in the early years of the first Reagan administration. Probably, there is truth to this. The reader will recall that President Reagan s first director of the Office of Management and Budget, David Stockman, launched a preemptive strike that sought to zero out all behavioral science research in the federal budget. In alarm (but without, as I recall, public attention), the major social science associations did launch a defense that involved senior behavioral scientists flying personally to Washington to meet with key members of Congress.

However, it remains unclear why such an early battle would be so traumatic as to inhibit these institutions into another administration and the early 1990s. Circumstances had changed. David Stockman had departed (and wrote a book to recant); the deficits and unanticipated fierce cost to the nation continued and grew yearly; and a new president was elected (George Bush) who would have been ill-inclined, as a matter of temperament, to attack the scientific Establishment and - having once criticized President Reagan for voodoo economics - might have dearly wished for mounting evidence to loosen the constraints he had inherited.

Thus, the bullying-and-intimidation hypothesis seems incomplete. In addition, it may gain a certain unwarranted plausibility because it fits so well with a liberal fantasy that good scientific evidence will demonstrate conclusively that Republican theories are wrong. This finding (so the scenario goes) would create a direct political challenge to Republican control (and even the legitimacy of the Republican Party) and thus, in turn, invite brutal retribution. But were the hysterical fears of brutal anti-scientific Republicans realistic?

This scenario, of course, rests upon a critical causal link, the a priori faith that scientific evidence would definitively prove Ronald Reagan and his fellow ideologues to be fools and charlatans. However, Republicans can be remarkably self-assured and usually believe that good science will prove they are right (and the liberals are wrong). In reality, Republicans might have supported new national indicators and a Michelson-Morley test they believed could end liberal criticism. Unless Frank Press and his associates name publicly the men who threatened them, or provide other plausible evidence that the leadership of the National Academy of Sciences tested the reality of its beliefs, the bullying-and-intimidation hypothesis will need to be treated with care.

### 3. Bad Decision Makers

Dealing in personalities is an unpleasant part of diagnosing breakdowns. Are the personal failings of the senior leaders of the National Academy of Sciences to blame?

I do not know. But these leaders seem to express the standard deference to authority studied by Milgram, Kelman, and others - the baseline of *The Emperor's New Clothes*. Unusual men might have transcended the pressures, but the causes appear more systemic. Especially so when one considers that most leaders of other national institutions - including the National Science Foundation, the major foundations, most leaders of the American politics field, and writers of political science, economics, and social psychology textbooks - also kept their mouths shut.

If there is a failing. I think it probably is a failing of a primitive civic philosophy, not personality. For example, the most elementary criticism of scientific leaders who acted out an emperor's-new-clothes mindset is that the United States is not a monarchy. In *other* fields, scientific professionals - including those directly appointed by the president - recognized this: Surgeon General Koops, for example, maintained the independent traditions of the medical profession as a firm advocate of continued research about the effects of smoking on health (and when asked about right-wing Republican criticism of his leadership for research and public candor concerning AIDS, he replied straightforwardly that he was Surgeon-General of all the people. ) An unusual man, perhaps. But not alone. Secretary of State George Schultz's role in the Iran-Contra affair comes to mind.

### 4. Establishment Arrogance

A fourth theory focuses on Establishment arrogance, the possibility that the leaders of the behavioral sciences would not condescend to acknowledge that Ronald Reagan might be right. Not fear, but arrogant and deliberate stonewalling is the explanation.

Certainly it is true that Ronald Reagan's competing ideas threatened the social science Establishment. In the academic world, these ideas represent a different intellectual lineage (group psychology and clinical sensibilities about emotional dynamics of hierarchical relations) than represented in the mainstream models of economics and American political behavior models. The autonomous rational actor of economic theory - profit motivation fixed at maximum and exogenous - is a different image. So, too, is the Michigan model of the American voter, which admits of no backward linkages from the political realm to affect individual motivation or personality. If Republican ideas were tested and showed *any* non-zero coefficients that established their ability to manipulate or otherwise change individual personality, the results would begin to undermine the status of a remarkably large number of Academy members. The introductory textbooks in economics, American politics, and social psychology would need to be rewritten.

Accompanying the Establishment-defense theory is a companion hypothesis that the defense of liberal political loyalties killed the scientific investigations. Certainly I can attest to the impression, in some locations as I spoke about this problem during the 1980s, that I was being seen as a Reagan admirer and committing a treasonous act by suggesting the ideas be tested.

I do, however, sense another aspect of defensiveness. The leadership of our national scientific institutions had not merely become coopted. I think the leaders had become arrogant, political actors in their own right, managing their own top-down dramas of political power, status, and control. The proposal - to step outside hierarchical dramas and test the validity of such models - may have been perfectly designed to reactivate the seductive entrapments that prevented the Academy's leadership from thinking and acting with more independence. And, in this respect, such a proposal could have been doubly threatening to self-defensive people drawn to positions of influence in the hierarchical

dramas of Washington, D.C.

#### IV. LESSONS

At this point, the *Titanic* has run aground. And the senior navigation staff is guilty - knew there were problems and kept its mouth shut. It is a deeply unsettling case, and the nation has paid a fierce cost. A new Congress and (Democratic) administration inevitably will reevaluate how they interpret scientific advice and to what degree they can trust national scientific institutions.

We can assume that nominees for the blame will be able to think of good reasons to justify their silence or shift blame. However, at some point a thoughtful case study by other scholars may be worthwhile, as it will teach the scientific and academic community about itself and teach students about the contemporary policy process. I have no basis to criticize the leadership of the National Academy of Sciences in its central work in the natural sciences. However, let me suggest several lessons about these breakdowns in the social and behavioral sciences:

1. Earlier, I would not have predicted the most alarming lesson: Republicans have at least one accurate insight - how vulnerable social institutions can become to government manipulation and corruption once they become dependent upon government funds. Decades ago, I would have predicted the National Academy of Sciences would stand firm against even the most zealous right-wing criticisms of Senator Joseph McCarthy. In the 1980s, apparently, a glare from David Stockman was sufficient to alter behavior for more than 10 years.

2. It would have been a more exciting and healthier decade if national scientific

institutions had told the truth forthrightly, with political independence. without fear or favor, and let the chips fall where the truth put them.

Perhaps the greatest cost has been - and will be - to the social sciences themselves. What survived was a dishearteningly narrow range of acceptable investigation - rational choice theories (*ad infinitum*), cognitive psychology, mathematical behavioral economics, Michigan-style, politically neutered datasets. Consider the counterfactual experiment, a good dust-up during the 1980s about the nature of reality. *If* the proposal for a Michelson-Morley-type experiment had been adopted and Republican social scientists were publicly challenged to commit themselves to indicators, you would have demonstrated to undergraduates - and to graduate students - that rigorous social science can make a vital contribution to public debate. You would have demonstrated why statistical tools and the ability to take random samples are socially useful. Why issues of psychometrics, construct validity, and reliability matter deeply - if you are going to base lessons for the future of a multi-trillion dollar economy on the lessons you draw. We might have taught, by example, why multi-disciplinary training and more integrative personal and professional identities can be unusually valuable.

3. Perhaps we should recognize a new kind of bias: political-controversy-avoiding bias. To do so may be vital: our safeguards against such bias have, in at least one key area, broken down and do not appear to be credibly repaired. As a nation, we value independent scientific judgment. We have created, and honor, the institution of academic tenure to encourage it. The National Academy of Sciences was created with an independence greater than even federal judges, the right to elect its own lifetime members without political review and the right to seek funding from a wide range of sources. Yet the safeguards did not work. The *quid pro quo* of tenure is candor, but the leaders of our national scientific Establishment broke their part of the contract.

4. The National Academy of Sciences tends to promote itself as a team player of the Establishment and to promote the legitimating belief that scientific progress is in the interest of all institutions. It is a useful mythology and probably accurate for the natural sciences: at this point, the natural sciences have won their historical battles against the medieval Church about the mechanisms of the universe, and for Darwin against Creationists. We have come to live in a more secular age as a result.

But in the social sciences, the comparable battles to base government policies on the schema of hypothesis and evidence have not yet been won. (They suffered a deep setback in the 1980s as the evasive leaders of the National Academy of Sciences abandoned the troops on the battlefield.) Scientific rationality in public policy is not merely a technocratic ally but may challenge (and threaten to change) the emotional bonds of power and the mythologies that play a role in inducing and maintaining the consent of the governed. I have no immediate answer to the problem (still) posed by the growth of the behavioral sciences, except to hope that a permanent upper limit has not been reached and that a case study will explore this dimension further.

Finally, the entire enterprise may not only be what it seems - a standard case of unwise political accommodation and intra-elite groupthink on a large scale, with costs to the economy. Rather, I suspect it will be more revealing to consider the case to illustrate a behavioral equation of strong hierarchical imagery in the encoding of political relationships and ideological thought. Such strong hierarchical visual imagery now seems to be processed in hard-wired channels, directly to the central nervous system, that partly bypass the neocortex. Understood in this way, hierarchical relations may have unusual power to shape (arouse or suppress) strong emotions relatively independent of higher-order processes and to dissociate action from thought.

In retrospect, the scientific inhibitions of the 1980s may have been induced by the impress of Republican leadership, mediated through the imagery of the high public offices they temporarily held. The proper lessons perhaps should be cast, not in the standard language of political controversy or moral blame, but in a wider discussion of strong, vivid hierarchical imagery and the resulting inhibition of independent thought and action in group psychology.

If this is true, then the suppressed lines of investigation of the 1980s may have - at least temporarily - cost us more dearly than the fierce economic price of policy impasse. The blocked scientific investigations might have illuminated a wide range of problems: barriers to political innovation and independent action; blocked learning and repetition in individual lives and psychopathology; and blocked learning and repetition in such collective behavior as the recycling themes of political ideology. A shared concern of liberals and thoughtful conservatives alike - to empower individuals by the alteration of hierarchical power relationships - might have become rigorously grounded.

In the mid-1990s an investigation that presses through to the other side may end up not with validating Republican or Democratic models, but with shifting the discussion and placing it onto a higher plane, with new pathways revealed. I hope so. It certainly would be a more attractive future than a continuation of archetypal reenactments inside Plato's cave.

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