

Scientific Authority and Political Myth

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In this talk I explore the changing nature of scientific authority in contemporary society. Intellectual elites have of course always wielded a disproportionate influence on politics. A main mechanism of this impact is in the creation of “political myth.” In short, political myth refers to a shared narrative of a social group that explains past, present and anticipated political events. Political myths are important because they contain an understanding of the causal mechanisms that are expected to link practical action with desired outcomes. When widely shared, political myth can be invisible. As John Maynard Keynes wrote in 1936, “practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist... it is ideas, not vested interests, which are dangerous for good or evil.” Influential political myths that have escaped beyond the intellectual community to influence broader politics and society include the notion of basic research and the associated linear model of research, the so-called “green revolution” and global agricultural innovation, and the social and political movement focused on human-caused climate change. I’m sure you can think of many others. Ideas really do change the world. Today, I argue, the political influence of scientific authority is about much more than powerful ideas. In this talk I will argue, in exploratory and provocative fashion, that the dynamics of scientific authority have changed profoundly in recent years and decades. Intellectuals no longer influence the world primarily through ideas that shape and become dominant political myths (though to be sure this remains an important mechanism of scientific authority). In addition, the highly-educated have come to be a powerful economic and political force in society. As such, we have come to take on the characteristics common to other interest groups, and unsurprisingly, a focus on self-interests over common interests. In addition to being highly educated, we (and yes, that is us) overwhelmingly vote left, are wealthy, hold “globalist” views and sort ourselves in our social and geographic characteristics accordingly. I will present a broad array of data in support of these assertions, with a focus on the US, but with some comparisons to France and the UK. In an era characterized by populist politics, associated with broad nationalistic, anti-immigrant, authoritarian and anti-intellectual tendencies among significant swaths of the public in the US and Europe, the growing political and social authority of scientists and academics suggests a profound rethinking of our roles in modern society. We need new political myths and mechanisms of mythmaking

appropriate for today's world. In this new context, if we are not careful our actions could reinforce the very tendencies that we seek to oppose, and arguably they already have.