

**Democracy without Technocratic Constraints -  
A Reflection Growing Out of an Extended Conversation  
with Chinese and German Colleagues**

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To people in China or Germany (or anywhere else, for that matter) America's response to the coronavirus pandemic must seem bizarre. President Trump has veered from denying the problem to blaming the media, China, and the World Health Organization; hiring and firing a suite of adviser sycophants; saying it is under control or will disappear naturally in warm weather; and touting fake cures such as hydroxychloroquine, even suggesting at one point the possible "injection" of heat or disinfectants into covid-19 patients. But it is important to recognize that Trump, although an extreme case, is not a complete anomaly. He represents a major strain in American social history and retains a base of strong popular support, generally estimated at between 35% and 45%.

Understanding this unique situation depends on recognizing the deep anti-intellectual tradition in American public life. Much more than China or Germany, the United States is an artificial construct, founded only a few hundred years ago by Europeans imagining an escape from the constrictions of their home cultures. Enacting Christian fundamentalist assertions of white individualist liberties, while denying the same to native inhabitants and African slaves, the United States was cobbled together by a few American *philosophes* who recognized its fragilities. In response they sought to found a democracy with technocratic constraints, that is, a republic. In line with the classical Western teaching that political stability was best achieved through a government combining democracy, aristocracy, and kingship, the new republic was given a democratic House of Representatives moderated by an elitist Senate competing with an aristocratically selected President and a semi-independent Judiciary to create what James Russell Lowell once described as "a machine that would go of itself."

With the 1828 election of Andrew Jackson as President the order of the founding technocrats began to fray in the face of an anti-intellectualism inherent in America's imaginative individualist rejection of the state and apotheosis of the pioneer and cowboy culture. Alexis de

Tocqueville sensed this during his 1830s visit. From its beginnings the struggle in American history has been to create "E pluribus unum" (from many, one) while largely failing to do so. Post-Civil War fights over immigration only made things worse. In the social ontology of radical libertarians, society is an epiphenomenon. As British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had it, "There is no such thing as society." As President Ronald Reagan echoed, "Government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem." Post-Jackson suspicion of elites and experts may have been moderated during the years of the New Deal, but Trump is much more representative of an American bimodal heritage than is commonly recognized.

In contrast to China and Germany, there is no consensus about the existence of a society that needs protection from the coronavirus. When libertarian Americans say they want to protect the American way of life, what they want to protect is the rights of individuals to do as they please and to make their own decisions about how to protect themselves. The counter view that we are all in this together exists but its supporters are decidedly less energetic and fight an uphill battle, precisely because they need to use technical knowledge to support their case. In a country where ~35% of the people do not believe in biological evolution and only ~25% accept the scientific consensus about climate change (with widespread limitations placed on the teaching of such issues in schools) it is inherently difficult to make a broadly persuasive case for collaboration. Indeed, because of the character of advanced technoscientific knowledge, which is dependent on increasingly complex instrumentation rather than on direct human perceptions, and the phenomena often described are remote in space and time, it can be hard for even sympathetic non-scientists to understand what is going on. The inherent challenge of living in an engineered and engineering world is dramatically on display in the dominant North America polity.

Against all technoscientific advice rather than in accord with it, there are protests in the United States against social distancing and the temporary closing of non-essential businesses. It is one thing to adopt a technocratically mediated policy of measured experiments in re-opening the economy and allowing more freedom in daily affairs. It is another to reject with a sense of resentment efforts to take into account what technoscientific expertise might be able to contribute to grasping the complexities of our symbiotic techno-social reality. The Revolutionary Era slogans such as "Don't tread on me" and "Give me liberty or give me death" have been redeployed in public protests against stay-at-home orders along with demands for opening up the economy. (Note too that it is "me" not "us" in these slogans.) "I have the right to decide for myself how I want to protect myself. Get the authoritarian government off my back."

Experts may belittle Trump as much as they want, but he offers a master class in Machiavellian politics. LIBERATE MICHIGAN. LIBERATE MINNESOTA. LIBERATE VIRGINIA he tweets in support of breaking stay-at-home orders in these states. The simple truth is that many Americans are driven by a fundamentalist commitment to individual freedom that undermines citizen-driven technocracy and any call for the most limited technocratic delimitation on individualism. To realize that this is not just a right wing phenomenon, recall the hippy rebellion against businesses that declared “no shirts no shoes no business” and the right to smoke anything they wanted.

One spillover effect of American libertarian ideology is a hermeneutics of suspicion of any community of experts such as that which obtains among scientists. American scientists can easily feel they have more in common with German or even Chinese scientists than they do non-scientist Americans. Scientists are regularly accused if not of treason of disloyalty and/or suspected of not being true Americans and so sometimes bend over backwards to proclaim their American-ness, which cannot help but look awkward if not like special pleading. “Our loyalty and utility should justify continued research funding.” The fact that coronavirus research has tended to enhance international cooperation among scientists only makes the situation worse. The American base feels the experts may ganging up on them — because, in fact, to some degree, they are. Although they would not use these terms, there is a felt need for expertise (or technocracy) to restrain democracy. For most Americans epidemiological models are more foreign than German or Chinese and yet such models are necessary if not sufficient for orientation in the new pandemic world.

Despite what I agree is the manifest need to do so, I am extremely skeptical of any truly effective international or global response, especially of advanced countries helping poor and developing ones. European countries even have trouble helping each other. America has always been ambivalent about one part of the country helping another part (a conflict that goes back to the founding and the effort to unite the 13 colonies) and even more so about helping other countries in its own sphere of influence (the Americas). One of the consistent public objections to the federal budget is the miniscule amount dedicated to foreign aid.

The need for cooperation and collaboration has never been more necessary than with climate change, but at the same time has never been (I fear) less likely. The current pandemic is demonstrating this in spades. Some kind of global technocratic collaboration and cooperation was never more needed but never less likely. The pandemic foretells a future much worse.