

Dr. Fauci and Our Pandemic of Distrust



(POOL/AFP via Getty Images)

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In the beginning, I trusted Dr. Fauci. The diminutive and elderly doctor projected a sense of calm confidence in the face of the unfolding pandemic. Like tens of millions of Americans, I looked to him for clarity in a time of great

confusion. It was also a time of extreme political polarization, but I expected Dr. Fauci, unlike virtually all of our public figures, to remain above the partisan fray.

The United States, like every other country in the world, has been under attack by an invisible enemy. Yet, two years into our pandemic, how to deal with the Coronavirus (COVID-19) remains highly contentious. COVID-19 attacks individuals, but it also represents an attack on the integrity of the nation as a whole. As its variants swarm throughout the country, it not only sickens and kills individuals; it disrupts all aspects of society. The nature of COVID-19 involves many variables, and approaches to dealing with the virus involve even more. What we have needed is what any country under attack needs: good intelligence and good information. We needed and still need good science.

Science and Democracy

"I represent science," Dr. Fauci [pronounced in a November, 2021 interview](#) with Margaret Brennan on CBS's *Face the Nation*. It was a statement [that would produce a firestorm of criticism](#) and no small amount of derision. But when Dr. Fauci first stepped onto the public stage in early 2020, this is precisely what I expected from him, and I believe this is what most Americans did too. I expected Dr. Fauci to be the communicator and clarifier of science, to *represent* all relevant science about the virus.

The "science" on any particular topic is merely the totality of information or data revealed by empirical methodologies. As a representative of science, Dr. Fauci's role, I presumed, would be advisory and pedagogic. He would serve as counsel to political leaders and as a teacher of the people. Although what we were going through was (and is) unprecedented, I felt at the time that Dr. Fauci's job was relatively straightforward. I even remember thinking

that he was actually in a position to be the great hero of the pandemic. He alone seemed to be in a unique role where he could transcend political conflict and embody a unifying force. The question was how well or clearly Dr. Fauci would represent science.

We live in a representative democracy which means, theoretically anyway, that authority ultimately resides with the people. This has significant implications for dealing with COVID-19. A democratic society would presumably deal with a pandemic quite differently than a more authoritarian society like, say, China. We might expect an authoritarian society largely to enforce a top-down response, but in a democratic society, all top-down responses need to be coordinated with bottom-up ones. A democratic society requires a high level of awareness and responsibility from every citizen when dealing with the pandemic. As responsible citizens, we needed to know the science and our roles as individuals in dealing with the virus.

When COVID-19 first struck, a considerable amount was known about coronaviruses in general but not so much about this particular virus. It was Dr. Fauci's job to inform us about the variables and to keep us apprised of ongoing developments. And, as importantly, we needed to be informed of what science knows only tentatively, as well as what science does not know well at all. We, as individual citizens, and our leaders needed to trust Dr. Fauci, and he needed, in turn, to trust us.

COVID-19 arrived at a time of extreme political conflict heightened by it being a presidential election year. In the first months of the virus, our political conflicts seemed to intensify. The media continued its partisan war against President Trump, and the virus itself was being dragged into the conflict. Dr. Fauci, at least initially, seemed to remain above the fray, and he was treated with a fair degree of respect by the media. But his role seemed to be shifting from purely advisory toward policymaking itself. Information was becoming

recommendations, and recommendations were becoming mandates.

I had long been skeptical of the so-called mainstream media, so I was already in the habit of consulting alternative news sources, and this included several sources commenting on the nature of the virus itself. Over the months, I noticed something peculiar. On a number of occasions talking with friends about the pandemic, I found that I was often relating certain information of which they were quite unaware (i.e., the minimal efficacy of masks, the age differential in death rates, the widespread asymptomatic spread, the reality of natural immunity, the real possibility of a lab leak origin of the virus, etc.). At first I found this puzzling since the information I was relating was apparently backed up by considerable scientific evidence and, it turns out, would be generally vindicated over time.

Apparently, my friends were relying upon mainstream news outlets for their information. And these outlets were all, more or less, relying on Dr. Fauci. More than once, a friend would assure me that Dr. Fauci was doing a wonderful job. But while Dr. Fauci may have been doing a good job of assuring large numbers of citizens, he was *not* doing his job of fully educating the public. Moreover, I noticed that he was not haphazardly emphasizing some science while ignoring other science; Dr. Fauci's science seemed to be following a consistent narrative. Not only did I notice—millions of other Americans noticed too. Thus began Dr. Fauci's fall from trust.

Following the Science

About a year into the pandemic, I drove past a handmade lawn sign that urged: "Trust Science." Handmade lawn signs here in rural Maine are not uncommon; however, over the past several years, they are almost all of the pro-Trump variety. Nevertheless, the "Trust Science" lawn sign seemed to be sending a message—indeed, making a political distinction. Apparently,

there are those of us who trust science and those of us who do not.

If there is one phrase we have heard repeatedly in the last two years it is this: "Follow the science." As our once more unified response to COVID-19 has fragmented into competing political divisions, both sides of the division continue urging us to follow the science. But we may well ask: Is there really any such thing as "following the science"?

Philosopher ([and mechanic](#)) Matthew Crawford [observes that](#) we cannot follow the science because "science doesn't lead you anywhere." Science presumes to be objective and disinterested. In fact, the "pride of science," observes Crawford is that it is "falsifiable." It is in the very nature of science that any scientific fact or theory allows itself to be challenged. The authority and power of science is, paradoxically, a function of its own disinterest, its own reluctance to presume authority. Scientific facts do not "speak for themselves"; they are actually mute. The so-called facts of science are in and of themselves meaningless until acted upon by some human interpreter. This is why Nietzsche famously [claimed that](#) "There are no facts, only interpretations." A fact of science may be true and simultaneously meaningless. We do not so much as follow science as science must first follow us.

When we look to science for values, to actually tell us how to behave, then "science," says Crawford, "must become something more like a religion." This is to say that science assumes a kind of unquestioned authority. The belief that all questions, or at least all questions worth asking, can be answered by science is not science but *scientism*. Scientism, in effect, affirms that science can even discover values, tell us how to live, and how to behave. Scientism is actually the conflation of science with some morality, some set of values. When someone urges that we follow the science, what he really means is for us to follow some interpretation of science, which is to

say, to follow the scientism.

Dr. Fauci, like anyone else, is free to make policy recommendations. But he has been invoking the authority of science in the name of some particular policy while insisting he is simply following science. As [Crawford points out](#), Dr. Fauci advocating a policy of lockdowns is clearly a political decision which dramatically affects certain groups more than others. For Zooming “knowledge workers,” lockdowns are a relatively minor inconvenience; however, for thousands of small business owners and their employees, lockdowns can represent the complete devastation of their livelihoods and ways of life. Here one set of “facts” are in conflict with another because one set of values is in conflict with another. Choosing or prioritizing some facts over others requires not simply following science but making a political judgment. When Dr. Fauci publicly [dismissed](#) the policy recommendations of the [Great Barrington Declaration](#) that opposed lockdowns, he was not doing science; he was doing politics.

Dr. Fauci has not simply been representing science; he has been representing science in the service of a particular narrative. “Over the past year,” observes Crawford, “a fearful public has acquiesced to an extraordinary extension of expert jurisdiction over every domain of life. A pattern of ‘government by emergency’ has become prominent, in which resistance to such incursions are characterized as ‘anti-science.’” Dr. Fauci’s supporters insist that to distrust Dr. Fauci is to distrust science itself. But is this all about distrust of science, or is it a distrust of the ideology behind the science?

A Handmaid’s Tale

“[S]cience,” Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in his 1886 work [Beyond Good and Evil](#), “has most happily rid itself of theology whose ‘handmaid’ it was too

long, it now aims with an excess of high spirits and a lack of understanding to lay down the laws for philosophy and to play the 'master' herself..." Nietzsche realized that "the scope and tower building of science" had become enormous, but he also realized that science itself is always guided and controlled by some authority or set of values outside of itself. If science can never truly be the master, who, today, is master?

Science for the past couple of centuries has been given a great deal of latitude—so much so, that it is not difficult to see how the concept of disinterested science or "pure science" has taken hold. Liberal modern societies have found it in their interest to allow science a great deal of freedom in its practice. It is not a coincidence that the free inquiry of science has flourished in the same kind of civilization that has valued free speech. Thus has arisen the functional illusion of doing pure science.

There was a time when doing science was a relatively solitary exercise carried out by lone individuals. Even into the 20th century, there was some truth to this romantic notion of science. We need only think of the patent clerk Albert Einstein conceiving his revolutionary theories riding on a tram. However, over the last century, science has become increasingly socialized and institutionalized: The actual doing of science involves large groups of scientists dependent upon large institutions and subject to the authority and values animating these organizations. And, inevitably, the values of institutions may be, to borrow Crawford's word, "orthogonal" to those of the free inquiry of science.

Over the past several generations, we have transferred political power to greater governmental institutions and economic power to greater corporate institutions. This has given rise to a class of experts and bureaucrats, a managerial class with tremendous powers and responsibilities. The doing of science has been completely enfolded into this world. The writer Wendell

Berry [has observed that](#) "science, technology and industry" have conflated into a single unified force in modern society. In other words, the doing of science has been enfolded into the production of some kind of social product. Here the "social utility" of science, says Crawford, has been "normalized." This arrangement has fueled what we call "progress" (i.e., the assumption that the benefits generated by science, technology, and industry outweigh the costs). We have implicitly assumed that all of this would remain subject to our democratic authority. Science could proceed as if disinterested so long as institutional interest and public interest aligned.

In recent years, and accelerated by the pandemic, all of this has begun to unravel as institutional interests are increasingly at odds with the public interest. The long-standing conflict between governmental and corporate interests has largely vanished as they increasingly discover their common bureaucratic and technocratic identities. As institutional authority unifies and fully matures, it comes into conflict with traditional democratic forms of authority. Modern institutions flourish in a world transformed into information, and, whatever else it is, science is the gold standard of information. Not surprisingly, the authority of science is claimed by institutional authority.

Science has been on a long leash for many years, but, recently, that leash appears to be shortening. "[I]t is the apolitical image of science as disinterested arbiter of reality," says Crawford, "that makes it such a powerful instrument of politics." Therefore "[i]ncreasingly, science is pressed into duty as authority. It is invoked to legitimate the transfer of sovereignty from democratic to technocratic bodies." However, the institutionalists appear to be overplaying their hand because the more they invoke the disinterested authority of science the more blatant their own ideological prejudices become. Inevitably, distrust of our institutions and expert classes spreads.

As Crawford suggests, all of these claims of authority by our bureaucratic classes have begun to sound very medieval. Any criticism of institutions is seen as criticism of the unquestionable expert authority of science itself. Challenging bureaucratic authority is challenging the revealed truths of science. Dr. Fauci is emblematic of a new priestly class who presume to embody *both* institutional authority and scientific authority. To challenge Dr. Fauci is, thus, to challenge a kind of revealed truth. Those who question Dr. Fauci are not merely expressing differing opinions; rather, they are apostates, "science deniers," "anti-vaxxers" spreading dangerous "misinformation," and they are worthy of ridicule, censorship, and, of course, cancellation. What this inevitably means is that democratic values come into conflict with institutional values. Free speech, like free inquiry, must be controlled and brought to heel. "We live in a mixed regime," says Crawford, "an unstable hybrid of democratic and technocratic forms of authority." The question is: How unstable?

Science is, again, handmaid to a new master. Very much as Nietzsche expected, the philosophical sterility of science has been dramatically revealed in recent years. Science, as science, is incapable of standing on its own, let alone ruling—it ultimately serves some master, some set of values beyond itself. And while the pandemic may have revealed science as the handmaid of institutional power, the George Floyd riots of 2020 have further clarified science as the mouthpiece for the progressive ideologies which now dominate institutions. Pressing social issues are now proclaimed as matters of science. Even the most prestigious of scientific journals are willing dummies for their ventriloquist masters: "Editorials in journals such as *The Lancet*, *New England Journal of Medicine*, *Scientific American* and even *Nature*" writes Crawford, "now speak the language of Critical Race Theory." Racism is declared an actual "[public health crisis](#)," apparently one worse than COVID-19 itself. Toss the demonic powers of white supremacy into the

witch's brew of anti-vaxxers and science deniers, and we have a truly lethal potion. How could any *self-respecting* scientific journal remain silent? The notion of science as disinterested was once a functional illusion; today, it is fast becoming a dysfunctional delusion.

Dr. Fauci has been functioning at a high level in the bureaucratic world for decades. Clearly, he is well-adapted to whatever changes that have occurred in the nature of our institutions in recent years. He has proven himself a master at navigating this reality and, with a straight face, is fully capable of articulate and compelling displays of righteous indignation when challenged. Too bad half the country no longer trusts him.

The Fall of Dr. Fauci

"Dr. Fauci, knowing that it is a crime to lie to Congress, do you wish to retract your statement of May 11th where you claimed that the NIH never funded gain of function research in Wuhan?" [Senator Rand Paul's confrontations](#) with Dr. Fauci regarding the origins of COVID-19 have made for compelling political theater, but they are also emblematic of our greater political and cultural divisions. Crawford's conflict of "democratic and technocratic forms of authority" is on full display in the persons of Senator Paul and Dr. Fauci.

Senator Paul has accused Dr. Fauci of not being forthcoming about the United States government's own role in funding the kind of research which may, in fact, be the origin of our pandemic. In recently revealed emails related to his apparent lack of candor on this matter, Dr. Fauci claimed to be concerned about [protecting science](#), but it seems he was not so much concerned with protecting the integrity of science itself as he was concerned about protecting the ability to keep doing a particular kind of science, the kind compatible with maintaining a relationship between American and Chinese research institutions. Dr. Fauci's first instincts were to

protect institutional authority, even from democratic authority. In contrast, Senator Paul presumes the doing of science is still under democratic authority and that Dr. Fauci has been flouting that authority. It seems never to have occurred to Dr. Fauci that American citizens, or at least their representatives, might have a right to be informed that they have been funding our participation in a kind of research which could potentially wipe human life off the face of the planet.

Dr. Fauci appears to have fallen from his pedestal and broken into two Dr. Faucis. One Dr. Fauci is the High Priest of Science whose every proclamation is presumed derived from some expertise or higher knowledge which we ourselves need only trust and who will lead us to the promised land of 100% vaccination or whatever. Dr. Fauci, no doubt, sees himself as a loyal public servant, loyal to science and acting in the public interest, though pursued and pestered by vengeful opportunists and idolatrous science deniers. For millions of others, Dr. Fauci is one more imperious "expert," contemptuous of the very people he has been hired to serve. Or worse, he is a veritable Bagdad Bob of COVID-19 propaganda serving the interests of the Deep State, the Swamp, Globalists, and Big Tech oligarchs. This we can state for certain: Dr. Fauci is no longer the universally trusted medium of disinterested science.

In hindsight what I expected of Dr. Fauci is now clearly somewhat fantastical and quite naive. Many of us had put him on a pedestal he had no intention of occupying. We trusted Dr. Fauci, but he never trusted us, and apparently it never even occurred to him that trust might be the most essential part of his job.

A Pandemic of Distrust

The pandemic has not so much revealed anything wholly new as it has

heightened processes already in play for years, even decades. We will no doubt survive our current pandemic. But we suffer a deeper, more debilitating pandemic—a pandemic of distrust. This was apparent before the pandemic, and now it is more apparent than ever. Our pandemic of distrust rages on with no simple cure in sight: Millions of Americans distrust our institutions, and our institutions distrust us.

But even more significantly, we have not trusted ourselves. We have been giving our powers and responsibilities away for decades. Power has drained away from local economies and communities into greater governmental and corporate institutions who are now so powerful they look to remake the world in their image. We have been systematically trading our own agency for a world of comfort and convenience. Did we really believe all of this has not come with a cost?

We put a blind trust in the integrity of science when in practice there is no disinterested science, there are no disinterested experts, and there are no disinterested institutions. We presumed respect from our institutions when we did not respect ourselves. The great American experiment is actually two simultaneous experiments: America is indeed an experiment in self-rule, but it is also an ongoing experiment on how long a people can keep on believing they can get something for nothing.

Dr. Fauci has asked so little of us because we have asked so little of ourselves. He and the bureaucrats and institutions he represents have not so much seized power as they are merely exercising powers already granted. Dr. Fauci has behaved like what he has always been: a function of a greater institutional power. He is simply guilty of the age-old conceit of all priest classes, that powers loaned are actually powers given. Millions of us may feel betrayed by Dr. Fauci, but what has Dr. Fauci taken from us that we had not already given?

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