CHAPTER ONE

SCIENCE AND POLITICS

Who is to decide on the limits of scientific research if not scientific research itself?

Karl Marx, The Leading Article in No. 179 of the Kölnische Zeitung

Introduction

The relationships between science and politics elicit multiple observations and criticisms. Nietzsche raged against forms of knowledge presented as Morality and Truth that dominate and control individuals. Though famously targeting religion, Nietzsche did not need to exaggerate in depicting philosophers and scientists as a collective ascending priesthood—Comte’s proposal for a Parisian cabal of sociologists caretaking humanity was not a metaphor. Later, following Nietzsche’s lead, Foucault traced how medical and psychiatric knowledge emerged as forms of domination from institutional arenas far removed from scientific inquiry, where all manner of violence, superstition, and quackery flourished. For his part, Marx (1991c: 26) had no doubt that there was a “scientific basis for socialism.” The use to which the Soviets put his ideas produced a Marx-in-caricature opposite. Anthropology was the progeny, in part, of the colonial system.

The interchange between power relations and scientific knowledge is not one-way. A redeeming Enlightenment principle is society’s and the individual’s right (and responsibility) to demand from institutions of knowledge and power—political, religious, scientific—that they explain and justify themselves. Why do these institutions exist? From where did they come? Are they necessary social relations or just temporary historical phenomena? How can we know what any of them claim is true? Once intellectuals won a realm of public discourse pivoting on such questions, critical inquiry did not overwhelm and negate traditional powers, as each institutional sphere negotiated jurisdictional spaces with the others. And, if anything, institutions of power work to turn back meddlesome inquiries and transform the intelligentsia into a partner.
Political entities (i.e., actors and institutions) can corrupt knowledge through censoring scientists or courting forms of research that serve their ends. Religious leaders initially repressed scientific endeavors, often violently, and many today continue to deny science’s insights. A tentative and provisional truce exists in some places but the religious are still on the attack in others, as are intellectuals in retort (e.g., Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Richard Dawkins). When religious reactionaries attain state power and when scientific findings challenge dogma, scientists are at greater risk; when scientists’ findings support doctrine, priesthodds court them, as do governments. Many Jewish, Christian, and Islamic fundamentalists reject evolution but embrace powerful armaments that science yields. Scientists help develop medicines for healing and biological weapons for killing, technology for mass communication and political-psychological techniques for audience manipulation, and tools for studying the heavens as well as those of mass surveillance. The German state drafted scientists to help facilitate the Holocaust, and the US Government, in Operation Paperclip, imported Nazi scientists after the war to become crucial figures in the US space program. Stalin supported the pseudo-science of Lycenko and purged dissenters, resulting in massive crop failure, famine, and starvation. George W. Bush’s administration blocked climate scientists from publishing research that did not serve their political-economic ends (Mooney 2005; Grant 2007).

Still, social institutions of power often must negotiate the world of knowledge. Past religious leaders who calibrated their doctrines with modernity’s institutional changes survived and their religions became qualitatively new. The Catholic Church long ago jettisoned the Ptolemaic model of the universe, though not without resistance. Today, it accepts evolutionary theory. Perhaps its denial of such new forms of knowledge would make its leaders appear out of touch, dogmatic, and insular (and, it was Georges Lemaître, a Catholic priest, who, after all, proposed the Big Bang Theory). There have been other changes in its doctrines as well. Indulgences and the Latin mass only exist today in minute crevasses. Certified laypersons participate in giving out Holy Communion. In 2007, the Vatican dispatched limbo from accepted teaching, part of it for centuries. These changes make today’s Church unrecognizable to a Christian believer from medieval Europe (whose religious faith would probably be unrecognized by many Christians from the first century). This type of negotiation is not ubiquitous,