

Critics have been quick to denounce the xenophobia, the science denialism, and the intimations of autocracy in the Trump movement, which is currently wreaking havoc on the Federal Government. As scientists and researchers, it would be simple to double-down on past strategies, chanting incantations of loyalty to ideals such as Reason and Truth, wringing our hands at the eruption of irrationality which has swept the nation. More solution-oriented critics cast the blame on our media ecosystem and news sources which profit from the mining of attention through lurid stories of dubious authenticity. Reprehensible though the attack on science and expertise may be, the impulse to explain away these movements with grand social and economic theories plays directly into the hands of the populists at their helm. They say to their constituents: “the elite do not take seriously your beliefs, your desires, your way of life,” and in response to genuine political disagreements—about the trade-offs between freedom and equality, progress and tradition—the urban professional class claims their values to be on the side of Evidence, of Love, of Truth. Implicit in this is that dissent can only be understood as a vote for the opposite of these values. What better proof of the populist’s assertion that their followers are being left behind than this attempt to disparage sincere political beliefs on the basis of virtues with which one would be insane to disagree? What happened to the academic left’s postmodern conviction that all values are political, that there is no neutral perspective from which to adjudicate disputes of this sort?

Unfortunately, many attempts at science communication and cross-political conversation which rely on a strict expert/layperson dichotomy seem to fuel the narrative that experts are far-away snobs with thinly-veiled political agendas. Whether this is actually true or not is besides the point. In consequential times such as these, what matters is that we work to mitigate the resentment and alienation which fuel these illiberal populist movements. *This involves taking seriously the protests against rule by expertise—obviously something about our culture’s and government’s relationship to technical expertise is not working for many people.* In *Tyranny of Merit*, philosopher Michael Sandel writes: “Some denounce the upsurge of nationalism as little more than a racist, xenophobic reaction against immigrants and multiculturalism . . . [but] it was also a rebuke for a technocratic approach to politics that is tone-deaf to the resentments of people who feel the economy and the culture have left them behind.” In *Notes from the Underground*, Fyodor Dostoevsky imagines a “crystal palace” where all is ordered with perfect rationality, catered to the liking of its inhabitants. As a character notes, such a life would be objectionable, as it would be impossible to “stick out your tongue furtively or make a rude gesture.” The crystal palace is a metaphor for technocracy, and “sticking out your tongue” a symbol for the rebellion evoked by such paternal, disempowering approaches to governance. *Science communicators must understand that the vision of a state administered by experts is politically unpopular, and they must work to articulate an alternative where respect for scientific knowledge and institutions is not in conflict with the values and concerns of ordinary people.* This, in my opinion, is an extremely complex and important task. Drawing from diverse humanistic and technical disciplines to articulate this alternative forms the basis of my interest in science policy.

In the 1700’s, David Hume famously posited that an “ought” cannot be derived from an “is.” The move of subsequent philosophers has been either to reaffirm this distinction, or to further complicate it by claiming that even supposedly objective “facts” are laden with value judgements. This suggests that there is no shortcutting politics. People disagree with each other, and there can be no appeal to a universal authority to sort out who is right. Thus, in liberal democracy—where conflict is the norm and people are free to think for themselves—one cannot rely on being *right*, one must also be *persuasive*. In my opinion, persuasion comes not from appeals to fraught (and now politicized) terms like Truth and Reason, but by listening to and respecting voices you may not agree with, by learning to inhabit other people’s world, and engaging with them on their own terms. A good science communicator speaks not as an authority, but as a potential friend in search of common ground. Speaking to fellow Americans as friends—and as people with common interests—is a skill we are quickly losing.