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Can the results of scientific inquiry become positive content for political action? Or, what is Al Gore on?

Dealing with climate change means dealing with the climate of public opinion. How else can global warming be diminished unless through a change in public opinion? But when public discourse is polluted by lies and half-truths, credibility leaves the public domain and cynicism grows. After six years of divisive and diversionary rhetoric, the Bush administration now commands the attention of only 28 percent of the U.S. public – most likely the same 28 percent who believe that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction and who also believe that Al Qaeda planned 9/11 from within the former Iraqi regime. With credibility so low, public speech must go underground to the catacombs of satire and skeptical lampoons. The Daily Show with Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert's The Colbert Report are the contemporary equivalents of Karl Kraus and Fritz Mauthner in Wittgenstein's Vienna: the torch of truth flickers on the fringes of public media.

In such a situation, a figure of sincerity, such as Al Gore, strikes an especially intriguing pose. As former politician, he understands the fickleness of public life but nevertheless assumes the task of swaying public opinion at a time of rhetorical meltdown. Gore abandons the realm of failed politics for a role in serious public oratory. He seeks to shift public opinion on an issue he has for decades studied and written about – global warming and climate change. Instead of leveraging his political followers for another run at executive power, Gore dons the robes of public professor, a teacher who combines Hollywood with board room presentations in order to call public opinion to the court of reason. He champions informed deliberation over faith-based initiatives. While most politicians in the United States push aside the economic constraints of environmental cleanup, Gore seeks to shift public awareness towards the “inconvenient truth.”

One may admire Gore's courage, or even accuse him of optimism, but his mission is a more complex and interesting conundrum than we have seen in a long time. Even if public rhetoric regains the sobriety and steady focus needed for action on the environment, the crux of Gore's message raises questions about the drift of politics in an age of unprecedented scientific discoveries.

Can the results of scientific inquiry become positive content for political action? Do scientific propositions have special qualities when brought into public deliberations? How does Gore's rhetoric change as he moves from politician to pedagogical orator? Do scientific truths, such as global warming data, “compel” democratic action? Does science provide only one input among other considerations? These questions might not make sense in a democracy devoted exclusively to Enlightenment rationality, but today's post-modern culture sees scientific empiricism as something less than the only game in town. The components of democracy include diverse forms of fundamentalist religion, alliances between traditional faiths and modern culture, as well as speculative futurism.

In his 2007 book, *The Assault on Reason*, Gore argues that “When reason itself comes under assault, American democracy is put at risk.” But while democracy may need reason as a

moderating influence to lessen the friction of opposing social forces, a specifically scientific rationality – nested as it is in a professional class of technicians – can actually endanger democratic institutions. During a pivotal period in the previous century, Karl Popper in his *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) argued that an open society must guard against any kind of dogmatism whether it is Marxist-Hegelian historicism or science itself if science is taken to be a method for achieving certainties.

If “big science” (scientism) wields its conclusions with dogmatic certitude, it becomes as much an enemy of open societies as any totalitarian movement. Popper, the philosopher of science, framed scientific results as propositions that have “not yet been falsified” rather than as certitudes that now compel assent from every rational person. A theory could not be proved, according to Popper, but it could be shown to be untrue. For a theory or hypothesis to count as true, it must expose itself to disproof. The necessity of accepting scientific results resides in the sphere of human tolerance, not in absolute certainties produced by accumulating “facts.” Reason has a role to play beyond the work of scientists because science must not be allowed to dominate an open society.

Al Gore shifts from politics to oratory. He must therefore maintain a delicate balance. An issue like global warming requires the scope of large-scale federal initiatives and so needs all the persuasive rhetoric that a new leadership can muster.

At the same time, scientific input should not be simplified to the point where scientific statements are aligned with political purposes and become indistinguishable from politics. Politics has over the centuries sometimes taken on cosmological issues – often with dubious results for scientists like Galileo. As we gradually take responsibility for the climate of “Spaceship Earth,” we should not forget that every spaceship, from those flown by today’s astronauts to the fictional *Starship Enterprise*, fall under a military chain of command – not a civilian, democratic authority. As the page of history turns, followers of Al Gore will need to develop a complex notion of reason if reason does indeed survive the recent assault.

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