

Liberals Can Be Anti-Science Too

We know the refrain: conservatives are “anti-science.” Whether the issue is evolution, climate change, stem-cell research, sex education, etc., conservatives simply reject the scientific consensus when it doesn’t fit their ideological dogmas. In some cases, there’s merit in that criticism. But it’s worth noting that liberals are by no means immune to similar thinking.

Evidence is on full display in medical historian Alice Dreger’s book [*Galileo’s Middle Finger: Heretics, Activists, and the Search for Justice in Science*](#), which was published a little more than a year ago. For a while I was planning to buy and read the book, but the mostly positive reviews put me off. That’s because Dreger, no conservative herself, recounts in painstaking detail two cases in which social scientists of impeccable academic reputation were nearly destroyed by eagerly orchestrated campaigns of calumny from left-leaning academics. The motive was simply that the latter hated the results of the former’s research for ideological reasons. It’s painful enough to read the summaries of what went on; I don’t think I could handle reading the full stories.

The events, however, are highly informative, and a compelling summary can be found in [this article](#) from last December by Jesse Singal, science columnist for *New York* magazine. Here’s a sample:

The first [case] involves Napoleon Chagnon, an extremely influential anthropologist who dedicated years of his life to understanding and living among the Yanomamö, an indigenous tribe situated in the Amazon rain forest on the Brazil-Venezuela border – there are a million copies of his 1968

book Yanomamö: The Fierce People in print, and it's viewed by many as an ethnographic classic. Chagnon made ideological enemies along the way; for one thing, he has long believed that human behavior and culture can be partially explained by evolution, which in some circles has been a frowned-upon idea. Perhaps more important, he has never sentimentalized his subjects, and his portrayal of the Yanomamö included, as Dreger writes, "males fighting violently over fertile females, domestic brutality, ritualized drug use, and ecological indifference." Dreger suggests that Chagnon's reputation as a careful, dedicated scholar didn't matter to his critics – what mattered was that his version of the Yanomamö was "Not your standard liberal image of the unjustly oppressed, naturally peaceful, environmentally gentle rain-forest Indian family.

In 2000, Chagnon's critics seized upon a once-in-a-career chance to go after him.

And go after him they did, because his results conflicted with the cherished narrative about primitive cultures. It was a years-long nightmare for Prof. Chagnon. Thanks largely to Dreger herself, Chagnon's reputation has been somewhat rehabilitated. But as Singal also notes, few of the publications that eagerly published the lies against Chagnon have issued corrections. That, apparently, would be a kind of party disloyalty.

Then there's [the case...](#)

*"...of J. Michael Bailey, a Northwestern University psychologist and researcher of human sexuality and former chair of that university's psychology department. In 2003, Bailey released *The Man Who Would Be Queen: The Science of Gender-Bending and Transsexualism*, a book in which he relates the stories of several transgender women and promotes the theories of Ray Blanchard, a Canadian sex researcher with a*

long history of working with patients who were born anatomically male but hoped to undergo gender reassignment.”

What so angered Bailey’s enemies would take too long to present in detail here. Suffice it to say that the results of his research did not square with their brand of transgender ideology.

Those, of course, are not the only cases in which liberal ideology gets in the way even of discussing certain possibilities. Many of us remember the 2005 case of Lawrence Summers, then president of Harvard University, who was eventually forced to resign because he suggested under-representation of women in math and science departments at elite academic institutions stem *partly* from innate differences between men and women. (Read more on that debate [here](#).) That suggestion was unacceptable as a subject for possible social-science research.

Though he doesn’t discuss that case, Singal puts the general lesson well:

“We should want researchers to poke around at the edges of “respectable” beliefs about gender and race and religion and sex and identity and trauma, and other issues that make us squirm. That’s why the scientific method was invented in the first place. If activists – any activists, regardless of their political orientation or the rightness of their cause – get to decide by fiat what is and isn’t an acceptable interpretation of the world, then science is pointless, and we should just throw the whole damn thing out.”

In other words: If you care about truth, watch out for ideologues.