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PIETAS

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Ellis Sandoz: In Memoriam

Remarks at the Sandoz Panel, the EVS Annual Meeting, 2024
by Martin Palouš

Common Sense and the Rule of Law: Returning Voegelin to Central Europe
by Martin Palouš

The Continued Significance of Political Sermons of the
American Founding Era
by Philip D de Mahy

Ellis Sandoz, American Patriot:
How and Why He Celebrated a Christian, Lockean Founding
by Glenn A. Moots

Ellis Sandoz and Chinese Quest for Liberty
by Promise Hsu

In Defense of Civilization: Scientism and the Covid 19 Response in the U.S.
by David N. Whitney

Book Reviews

Reviews of Patrick J. Deneen's *Regime Change*
by Ethan Alexander-Davey
by Tiffany Miller
by Ben Peterson
by Luke C. Sheahan

**In Defense of Civilization:
Scientism and the COVID-19 Response in the U.S.**

David N. Whitney

Presented at a roundtable in honor of Ellis Sandoz at APSA 2024

“You have offended everyone! Load your gun for bear.” These were the words Ellis Sandoz used in response to reading the draft of my dissertation on scientism in 2010.¹ Among the offended were presumably those within the very discipline I ultimately joined: political science. The decision to study with Sandoz, assuming he would have me as a student, was fairly easy. I had first encountered the work of his mentor, Eric Voegelin, as an undergrad at LSU in the introduction to political theory class. At the time, I understood very little of the book, *The New Science of Politics*, but nevertheless sensed the animating spirit of the work as active resistance to untruth. Upon entering my first semester of grad school several years later, Voegelin’s focus on positivism suddenly made a lot more sense. Every student, regardless of the subfield, had to take two classes in quantitative methodology, and “training” was routinely used instead of education to describe the process. This was not unique to the program I was in, but was rather a reflection of the dominant assumptions and operations of the discipline. The questions being asked in the top journals were not the kinds of questions that had drawn me to the discipline as an undergraduate and seemed disconnected from political reality.

Fortunately, my first semester of graduate school included a seminar with Ellis Sandoz, which included some of his own writings on republicanism. *This* was the stuff I signed up for! No punches were pulled, but the style and substance were philosophical and practical, not polemical. More importantly, the scholarship was clearly first rate. His approach in seminars and undergraduate courses (I served as his teaching assistant for several years) was

¹ Ellis Sandoz, *The Voegelinian Revolution* (2nd ed., Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000): 28: “Truth sometimes requires hard words.”

consistent with his scholarship. The topics covered were of existential importance, but Professor Sandoz had a way of mixing in humor and relating personal stories to ground the discussions.² Although I was not sure exactly what direction my studies would take, I knew I wanted to address the inherent tension I had experienced in that first semester between what I thought political science was and should be, and the apparent state of the discipline. Moreover, like Sandoz, I wanted to study something that could be easily justified by a “so what” question.³ A research program crystallized over subsequent semesters and given the indebtedness to Sandoz and Voegelin for its philosophical foundations, I thought it fitting to stick with the theme here. In this essay, I will risk offending everyone yet again by examining a contemporary example of scientism: the COVID-19 crisis and its response within the United States.⁴

In the summer of 2023, a new subvariant of the SARS-CoV-2, or COVID-19, virus arrived in the United States, headlining both local and national newscasts. Aptly named Eris, Greek for strife or discord, the coverage was remarkably similar to previous variants, notwithstanding the fact it was no longer an officially declared emergency by the U.S. government. Cases were reported, along with estimates for the percentage of the population that might be infected, and the CDC issued guidelines for isolation. The contagious nature of the virus was emphasized while little information was provided as to the severity of it. Mask mandates were even reimplemented in some locations.⁵ This begs the question: what have policymakers and public health officials learned, if anything, over the past four years? Have they “followed the science” or merely invoked its authority to exert more control and influence over the public? This paper will examine the policy responses to COVID-19 within the United States, including the justifications and efficacy of those policies, with an eye toward better navigating future challenges related to science and society. In spite of claims to

² A favorite that I still retell in my political theory courses involves an officer of the law who was an A+ student in Dr. Sandoz’s political theory class. He knew the *Nicomachean Ethics* in and out. Throughout the semester there was a string of bank robberies. Towards the end, the officer was caught and arrested for the crimes and sent a letter to Dr. Sandoz asking him if he could complete the final exam via correspondence from prison. With a scowl, he replied, “Hell no, you haven’t learned a damn thing!”

³ As Voegelin pointed out, the “philosopher is a man like any other: as far as the order of society is concerned, he has no other questions to ask than those of his fellow citizens.” Echoing this, Sandoz always insisted on addressing the political consequences of whatever was being studied. See Eric Voegelin. *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, ed. Sandoz (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2004), 12.

⁴ While Sandoz’s writings have widespread philosophical applicability, there is no doubt he took a special interest in the health of the American polity. I am following his lead in this essay.

⁵ Jillian Kramer, “Dillard University orders masking as COVID cases rise in Louisiana,” *nola.com*, August 25, 2023.

IN DEFENSE OF CIVILIZATION: SCIENTISM AND THE COVID-19 RESPONSE IN THE U.S.

represent science, I argue that public policy responses were more often than not rooted in scientism. Far from being objective, rational partisans for truth, public health officials and policy makers often resembled ideological activists. While this attitude has not been uncommon in contemporary American politics in recent decades, the consequences in this case have been nothing short of disastrous. With an ongoing Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) revolution and unprecedented climate challenges, not to mention unforeseen threats, the country cannot afford to continue to delegate policy making authority to scientific zealots. Thus, I end with some potential “therapeutic” treatments for this spiritual and intellectual disease.

Before examining the COVID-19 outbreak and policy responses within the United States, it is important to outline what is meant by scientism. The impact of the advancement of science since Newton is hard to overstate, both in terms of our understanding of the natural world and our subsequent power over nature. The United States has arguably benefited from, and contributed to, advances in science more than any other nation-state over the last century, with feats such as the Manhattan project, space exploration, the IT revolution, and countless medical breakthroughs. As a world leader in technology and the hegemon of the international system, the affinity for (natural) science, at least in terms of its utility, is understandable. However, the decisions about how, or if, to use the power given to us by our scientific knowledge cannot be made within the framework of natural science. Whether something is good or bad for humanity is indeed a scientific question, but one that lies in the domain of political, not natural, science. Natural science must remain neutral on ethical and political questions, although it can certainly aid in making informed decisions. To use the Manhattan project as an example, our understanding of natural science allowed us to create an atomic superweapon, but told us nothing about whether we *should* create it or ultimately deploy it. “Follow the science” and “trust the science” are unhelpful pieces of advice in the context of policy making, assuming natural science is the referent.

Scientism emerged as a logical, if not necessary, ideology out of a climate with greatly increased material comfort, first through the Industrial Revolution and more recently, the Informational Technology (IT) revolution. Accompanying the material progress was a spiritual decline, obvious early on to diverse thinkers such as Auguste Comte, Karl Marx,

PIETAS

and Friedrich Nietzsche.⁶ Scientism is a deformation of science and arrogates the name of science to pseudo-scientific, and often politically motivated, endeavors. It refers to the intellectual movement that places primacy on the methods of the natural sciences. It can be characterized as a pseudo-religion or a form of idolatry since its adherents express a dogmatic faith in the power of science. As Voegelin noted, “Science becomes an idol that will magically cure the evils of existence and transform the nature of man.”⁷ This ignores the limitations of the scope of science and mistakenly ascribes transformative power to it. In spite of differences of emphasis within scientistic thought, several important themes remain constant within the movement including: the dogmatic faith in the methods of the natural sciences (and the accompanying assumption that those methods can be successfully imported into the social sciences), a materialistic worldview, the rejection of the *bios theoretikos* (the contemplative life), the prohibition of philosophical questions, and an emphasis on immanent fulfillment through the power of science.⁸ Scientism is motivated by a desire for control and uses the authority of science to achieve ideological aims. It invokes the name of science to give credibility to otherwise dubious claims. By contrast, science is characterized by an openness to reality and the desire for truth about the nature of things. It deals with probabilistic, not absolute, propositions. I will now turn to the COVID 19 response within the U.S. to demonstrate its scientistic characteristics.

FLATTENING THE CURVE

Amidst growing uncertainty and understandable fear in the initial months of the COVID-19 outbreak, policy makers in the United States and in much of the rest of the world implemented lockdowns. In the United States, it was presented as a short-term necessity, initially two weeks, to slow the spread of the virus in order for hospitals to continue to function properly. With a seemingly exponential growth of new cases and very little knowledge about the virus’s transmission or lethality, the concern was that hospitals would

⁶ This is not to suggest any of them had good answers for it. Comte is particularly noteworthy since his solution was to fill that void with science through dictatorial means, and it is his project that arguably can teach us the most about our current crisis.

⁷ Eric Voegelin, *The English Quest for the Concrete*, in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, vol. 24: History of Political Ideas, vol. 6: Revolution and the New Science*, ed. Barry Cooper (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 214-15, 208.

⁸ David Whitney, *Maladies of Modernity: Scientism and the Deformation of Political Order* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine Press, 2019), 8.

IN DEFENSE OF CIVILIZATION: SCIENTISM AND THE COVID-19 RESPONSE IN THE U.S.

be overrun with patients and many would die. At this point in the crisis, it seemed perfectly reasonable to take this course of action as a short-term measure to potentially save tens of thousands of lives.

During the same time frame, debates arose as to what other measures could be taken to mitigate the spread of the virus. At a common-sense level, medical grade masks seemed to be a good solution. However, the then director of the National Institute of Allergies and Infectious Diseases, Dr. Anthony Fauci, stated, “There’s no reason to be walking around with a mask. When you’re in the middle of an outbreak, wearing a mask might make people feel a little bit better and it might even block a droplet, but it’s not providing the perfect protection that people think that it is. And, often, there are unintended consequences—people keep fiddling with the mask and they keep touching their face.”⁹ Within a month, the CDC recommended masking “in public settings when around people outside their household, especially when social distancing measures are difficult to maintain.”¹⁰ Later, Dr. Fauci would explain that he engaged in a noble lie to try to preserve protective equipment for medical professionals. This breach of public trust exemplified a few enduring points about the way policies would be created and implemented during the pandemic. In neither case was there an appeal to scientific studies on masks nor was data presented to bolster either position. Rather, the implication was that because someone with scientific credentials was saying it, it must be true. Furthermore, there was an assumption that people were too dumb to handle the truth. In more technical terms, a “moral epistemic apparatus in which the experts are to rule over citizens conceived as fragile incompetents” was solidified.¹¹

Two weeks turned into two months and then into a year or more in many locations within the United States. This occurred in part because of shifting goalposts or what some have described as “mission creep.”¹² An important component to this shift was the widespread availability of reliable tests. The Trump Administration bragged about its testing capacity by midsummer, which on one hand was justified, as it required a massive logistical effort.¹³ However, the idea that on demand, rapid testing (including of asymptomatic healthy

⁹ “March 2020: Dr. Anthony Fauci talks with Dr Jon LaPook about Covid-19,” *60 Minutes*, March 8, 2020, *Youtube*.

¹⁰ “CDC Museum COVID-19 Timeline,” *US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*.

¹¹ Barry Cooper and Marco Navarro-Genie, *COVID-19: The Politics of a Pandemic Moral Panic* (Winnipeg, MB: Frontier Centre for Public Policy, 2021), 47.

¹² Cooper and Navarro-Genie, *COVID-19: The Politics of a Pandemic Moral Panic*, 46.

¹³ Scott W. Atlas, MD, *A Plague Upon Our House: My Fight at the Trump White House to Stop COVID from Destroying America* (New York: Liberatio Protocol, 2021), 102.

PIETAS

people) was somehow a significant breakthrough in the societal struggle against COVID-19 could only be assumed if the mission was no longer to prevent hospitals from being overrun. The federal and state governments became obsessed with cases, as opposed to serious illnesses that would require hospitalization. One result of massive, widescale testing is that it results in far more cases. More cases then lead to a conclusion that the problem is getting worse and justifies prolonged lockdowns. Instead of questioning whether the lockdowns were indeed effective in flattening the curve, the assumption was made that the increasing cases would have been much worse without such measures. An accompanying assumption was made that the failure to prevent more cases must be a result of non-compliance with masking and distancing measures, and again, led to justification for even stricter measures.

A SHOT AT NORMAL

In spite of this negative outlook, there was a glimmer of hope as a massive public/private partnership was launched, labeled Operation Warp Speed, to develop a vaccine. With no proven therapeutics and persistent cases even in areas with the strictest mask mandates, a vaccine seemed to be the best way out of the crisis.¹⁴ It was not without its skeptics. Mainstream media, politicians, and many scientists, including high profile officials such as Dr. Fauci and the head of the CDC, Dr. Robert Redfield, said that the timeline provided by the Trump administration was simply impossible.¹⁵ Instead of six months, it would likely take at least 18 months, if not longer. Yet by the eve of the 2020 United States presidential election, vaccines were nearly ready to go (a legitimate scientific achievement), and millions in the U.S. had received them by the end of the year, as the FDA granted emergency authorization to Pfizer and Moderna to begin administering their mRNA vaccines.¹⁶ Johnson & Johnson received authorization in February of 2021, meaning that there were three vaccine options to the public in less than one year after the outbreak was officially declared. The

¹⁴ One contributing factor to the lack of therapeutics was a dogmatic opposition to seemingly almost anything that showed potential in helping. The debate surrounding the use of hydroxychloroquine is a prime example. The drug had been safely used by millions for over half a century. Whether it was effective or not is something that could have easily been tested in a clinical setting. Doctors were ultimately stopped from prescribing it; see Atlas, *A Plague Upon Our House*, 372.

¹⁵ Atlas, *A Plague Upon Our House*, 211.

¹⁶ “[Data: Total COVID-19 vaccine doses administered](#),” *Our World in Data*, August 14, 2024.

IN DEFENSE OF CIVILIZATION: SCIENTISM AND THE COVID-19 RESPONSE IN THE U.S.

vaccine was presented as a way to return to normal to a citizenry desperate to do so.¹⁷ If citizens wanted to resume ordinary activities such as eating in crowded restaurants and riding public transportation, the solution was seemingly simple: get vaccinated.

The narrative began to shift rather quickly as it became apparent that the vaccine would not prevent transmission of the disease, especially as the Delta and Omicron waves emerged in the summer and fall of 2021. While the vaccine would serve as a passport to certain restaurants and sporting events, the promises of a return to normal did not materialize as infections spread among the vaccinated and unvaccinated. Instead of returning to normal, the messaging about vaccines was now directed towards lessening the severity of the disease rather than stopping its transmission. The “new normal” meant restrictions would remain in place in many states because everyone was a potential carrier of the virus, even those with no symptoms. As Cooper and Navarro-Genie explain, the “new normal” can be characterized as “a regime of truth where mathematical models of infections rates are followed by state directions, action plans, emergency measures, government health communiques, legal or constitutional modifications, rearrangements of powers for enforcers, speeches, and regular television appearances organized as briefings by politicians.”¹⁸

SACRIFICING THE YOUNG FOR THE OLD

As mentioned previously, the initial lockdowns were somewhat justifiable scientifically, since very little was known about the virus early on. However, as data became widely available, it was clear that the virus had a disproportionately severe impact on the elderly and those who were in otherwise poor health. In 2020, 81% of deaths attributable to COVID-19 in the U.S. were from the age group of 65 and above. The CDC acknowledged deaths from each of the past five flu seasons and hospitalization rates from influenza were higher than COVID-19 deaths and hospitalization rates among those aged 0-17.¹⁹ Very few children or adolescents were dying from the virus, a trend that continued throughout all subsequent waves. Of the 1.1 million deaths attributed to COVID-19 through June of 2023, about 1,600 came from the 0-17 age group. By contrast, nearly 860,000 were from the age groups of 65 and up.

¹⁷ During a town hall in 2021, President Biden echoed this optimistic sentiment: “You’re not going to get COVID if you have these vaccinations”; Calvin Woodward and Hope Yen, “[AP FACT CHECK: Biden goes too far in assurances on vaccines](#),” *APNews*, July 22, 2021.

¹⁸ Cooper and Navarro-Genie, *COVID-19: The Politics of a Pandemic Moral Panic*, 130.

¹⁹ Atlas, *A Plague Upon Our House*, 190.

Importantly, evidence emerged within the first year that children and adolescents were *not* vectors of the virus. They were in fact much less likely to spread the virus than their adult counterparts.²⁰ Nevertheless, policies were crafted treating children, adolescents, and young adults as if they were at serious risk of both dying and causing others to die through transmission.

One of the most impactful decisions made in the fall of 2020 was to continue to include schools in the lockdown policies.²¹ Some districts shifted to limited in-person instruction, with the rest of the time reserved for online instruction, while others remained all online. Only 17% of districts were open for normal instruction in the fall and by the spring of 2021, half were still restricted.²² Teachers' unions certainly played a role in the decision, but the underlying assumptions in the national response arguably would have led to the same outcomes without them. Even though children were remarkably resilient to the virus, they were perceived as carriers who could spread the virus to their immune-compromised grandparents or parents. Data from Europe, where schools had been opened, should have allayed these fears: "studies from Finland, Sweden, the Netherlands, Switzerland, France, the UK, and elsewhere confirmed the fact that children were almost always infected from adults, not the other way around; that few cases originated in schools; that teachers did not have higher infection rates than those in any other occupation; and that school 'outbreaks' were typically just positive tests without any symptoms or only mild illnesses."²³ In spite of evidence to the contrary, citizens in the United States were simply expected to trust the public health officials who were uttering the phrases.

The decision to not reopen schools, in spite of ample evidence demonstrating minimal risk, is a microcosm of the overall response to the pandemic. Even if there had been evidence of greater health risks, those risks *should* have been weighed against other risks, including, but not limited to: stagnation or regression in educational attainment, stunted social development, mental health issues, malnourishment (especially for students from low-income households), and unreported child abuse cases (as many reports originate from

²⁰ Atlas, *A Plague Upon Our House*, 188.

²¹ Florida stood as the lone exception.

²² Atlas, *A Plague Upon Our House*, 327.

²³ Atlas, *A Plague Upon Our House*, 192-93.

IN DEFENSE OF CIVILIZATION: SCIENTISM AND THE COVID-19 RESPONSE IN THE U.S.

schools).²⁴ Policies involve trade-offs and one cannot assess the success, or failure, of a particular policy in isolation.

CALCULATING THE COSTS

The failure to consider the good of the whole in crafting COVID-19 policies has had dire consequences. Among the most alarming statistics is the measure of “excess deaths.” Based on data from previous years, we can get a reasonable estimate of expected deaths in any given year in a number of categories. Excess deaths result whenever the number of observed deaths is greater than the expected deaths. In the case of COVID-19, excess deaths in the United States through 2022 totaled over 1.3 million.²⁵ With the deaths attributed to COVID-19 removed, there were still several thousand deaths beyond what would have been expected. Globally, the estimate is well over 20 million excess deaths, with only 7 million directly attributable to COVID-19.²⁶ These deaths can be attributed to a variety of causes including, but not limited to: lapses in routine medical care and screenings, drug overdoses, alcohol abuse, violent crime, and suicides. There have been tremendous economic costs associated with the policy responses as well, estimated to total over 14 trillion by the end of 2023 according to scholars at the University of Southern California’s Schaefer Center for Health Policy and Economics.²⁷ Air travel, dining, and healthcare/social services have taken the biggest respective hits. The overall impact has been twice that of the Great Recession of 2007–2009. There are other costs that are not easily measurable, such as the impact of long COVID-19, vaccine hesitancy, loss of trust in public institutions, and increased political polarization. Even more depressing is the data on the efficacy of the lockdowns. Knowing that they created so many negative effects, one might find solace in the many lives saved, had that actually been the case. According to an extensive study in the journal *Nature*, popular mitigation measures such as school closures, public service announcements, international travel restrictions, gathering restrictions, workplace closures, closure of public transport, and

²⁴ Atlas, *A Plague Upon Our House*, 326.

²⁵ “The Pandemic’s True Death Toll,” *The Economist*, October 25, 2022.

²⁶ “Estimated cumulative excess deaths during COVID-19, World,” *Our World in Data*, August 19, 2024.

²⁷ Jakub Hlávka and Adam Rose, “COVID-19’s Total Cost to the U.S. Economy Will Reach \$14 Trillion by End of 2023,” *Schaefer Center for Health Policy & Economics*, May 16, 2023.

facial coverings had minimal impacts in stopping the spread of the virus or on mortality rates.²⁸

DIAGNOSING THE DISEASE

Now that some of the symptoms have been described, a diagnosis is in order. While the virus did pose significant risks to a relatively small percentage of the population, the most extensive damage was arguably done by the policies enacted to combat it. While much has been written about the impact of various policies, there have been relatively few studies on the philosophy, or more accurately ideology, driving those decisions. Barry Cooper and Marco Navarro-Genie persuasively argue that the crisis can best be understood as a moral panic, driven at its core by the concept of power-knowledge, a term coined by Foucault.²⁹ The underlying assumption is that “truth is not something discovered ... but is a reality that is at least in part produced by power.”³⁰ They also single out two liberal thinkers: Kant, for his universalism, and Hobbes, for the reliance on fear, as major philosophical influences.³¹ The charge against Kant is drawn from the refusal to differentiate between lives, namely old and young, in the policy responses.³² However, it is worth noting that Kant rejected the materialistic worldview of many of his scientific contemporaries and left room for the contemplative life, something absent in the philosophy of Hobbes. The charge against Hobbes is well placed, as he makes fear of (violent) death a central component of his philosophy. Hobbes focuses on the *summum malum*, without acknowledging that a *summum bonum* even exists.³³ Humans are merely “matter in motion,” justice is artificial, and rights are grounded in survival rather than any objective moral order. Hobbes tells us force and fraud are the cardinal virtues of the state of nature as every other individual is a potential enemy, and civil government is the necessary (and artificial) solution to maximize

²⁸ K. Agyapon-Ntra and P.E. McSharry, “A global analysis of the effectiveness of policy responses to COVID-19,” *Scientific Reports* 13, no. 5629 (2023). Interestingly, they did find masks to be the cheapest and most effective measure registering a modest impact of roughly 8%, four times greater than school closures.

²⁹ It is worth noting that their study focused primarily on responses by the Canadian government, but there is significant overlap in the types of arguments made and policies enacted.

³⁰ Cooper and Navarro-Genie, *COVID-19: The Politics of a Pandemic Moral Panic*, 26.

³¹ Cooper and Navarro-Genie, *COVID-19: The Politics of a Pandemic Moral Panic*, 132–34.

³² This was undoubtedly a problem in the U.S. as evident in the school closures.

³³ In other words, he orients his philosophy toward avoiding the worst evil instead of pursuing the highest good. This was the main critique leveled by Voegelin against Hobbes. See Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 70–72.

IN DEFENSE OF CIVILIZATION: SCIENTISM AND THE COVID-19 RESPONSE IN THE U.S.

the chances of physical survival.³⁴ Furthermore, as long as that government protects the lives of its citizens (or subjects), its authority remains legitimate. While some may quibble with the “violence” of COVID-19, one can indeed see a parallel, as those with the virus (particularly without masks or vaccines) were seen as enemies who posed an existential threat to their fellow citizens. Prominent public health officials such as Dr. Fauci lamented that people were not afraid enough.³⁵ Fear of the virus and of fellow citizens was cultivated by the media and public officials in order to ensure ratings and compliance with orders. Public health officials made saving lives the singular goal, ignoring the possibility that what makes life worth living extends beyond the mere survival of our physical bodies.³⁶

Two other figures are worth mentioning to enhance our understanding of the response to COVID-19: Francis Bacon and Auguste Comte. Hobbes and Bacon are closely connected both in personal and philosophical dimensions. Hobbes served as Bacon’s secretary and wanted to base his philosophy on scientific, demonstrable principles. While not known for any particular scientific achievement, Bacon was *the* partisan for science in the early modern period.³⁷ He forcefully argued for the experimental method and thought all true knowledge, including in politics, could be united by it:

It may also be doubted (rather than objected) whether we are speaking of perfecting only Natural Philosophy by our method or also the other sciences, Logic, Ethics and Politics. We certainly mean all that we have said to apply to all of them, and just as common logic, which governs things by means of the syllogism, is applicable not only to the natural sciences but to all the sciences, so also our science, which proceeds by *induction*, covers all.³⁸

The new method would be integrated within the educational system and would bring about a foundational shift in society, as it would give man incredible power over nature that previously eluded him.

Bacon’s *New Atlantis* provides a glimpse of what is possible with the new science. Bensalem is a secretive, technological utopia led by the scientists of Solomon’s House. Their

³⁴ *Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan*, I.13.

³⁵ Atlas, *A Plague Upon Our House*, 186.

³⁶ Contra Christianity and Platonic-Aristotelean philosophy, the materialistic worldview posits nothing beyond the physical body and thus its preservation becomes paramount.

³⁷ Paolo Rossi, *Francis Bacon: From Magic to Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), xiii.

³⁸ Francis Bacon, *The New Organon (Novum Organum)*, eds. Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 98.

PIETAS

knowledge has essentially allowed them to conquer nature and its vicissitudes including controlling the weather, significantly prolonging life (death is not mentioned in the myth), and genetic engineering.³⁹ Preservation of the physical body and material comfort seem to be the decisive values of the society. Scientists decide which inventions to disclose, or not disclose, to the state and the population. Importantly, Bacon does not tell us how those decisions are made or how the scientists gained power in the first place.

Like Bacon, Auguste Comte thought society could, and should, be reorganized on the basis of scientific knowledge. Because he was writing two hundred years later in an industrializing society, he no longer had to argue for the utility of science: it was readily apparent to the average citizen. Isaac Newton had revolutionized physics shortly after Bacon and dozens of scientific advancements followed thereafter. The authority of science had at least in part supplanted the authority of religion. The challenge Comte did face, particularly in the wake of the French revolution, was to reestablish order in a society where the crown and church had been considerably weakened. He rejected the liberal, democratic solution, but saw a return to pre-Revolutionary order as neither desirable nor possible. His solution was to first recast the educational system through the introduction of his Positive philosophy. Like Bacon, he compared ancient and medieval thinkers to children and adolescents, talking a lot, but not delivering tangible results.⁴⁰ By positivizing the major branches of knowledge, along the same lines as physics had been by Newton, we would arrive at a social physics. The discovery of laws of human behavior and society would allow for the emergence of a Positive Polity, synthesizing the illusory goals of order and progress.

The intellectual revolution would be supplemented by a spiritual revolution, as Comte realized the decline of Christianity left a spiritual vacuum. The Religion of Humanity was started, with Comte conveniently ready to serve as the Pope. Aldous Huxley's characterization of the religion as "Catholicism minus Christianity" can hardly be improved.⁴¹ The priests of the religion were trained not only to counsel in spiritual matters, but also to heal the body. In the absence of an immortal soul and afterlife, a true servant of Humanity

³⁹ Bacon, *Essays and New Atlantis*, ed. Gordon Haight (New York: Walter Black Publishing, 1942), 292.

⁴⁰ Auguste Comte, *Introduction to Positive Philosophy*, ed. Frederick Ferre (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1998), 4.

⁴¹ Andrew Wernick, *Auguste Comte and the Religion of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 185.

IN DEFENSE OF CIVILIZATION: SCIENTISM AND THE COVID-19 RESPONSE IN THE U.S.

could live on after death through the contributions he or she had made during life. Uniquely built into the religion was a prohibition of traditional theological or metaphysical questions:

The Positive faith sets forth directly the real *laws* of the different phenomena observable, whether internal or external; i.e., their unvarying relations of succession and resemblance, which enables us to foresee some as a consequence of others. It puts aside, as absolutely beyond our reach and essentially idle, all inquiry into *causes* properly so-called, first or final, of any events whatever. In its theoretical conceptions it always explains the *how*, never the *why*. But when it is pointing out the means of guiding our activity, it on the contrary makes consideration of the end constantly paramount; as the practical result is then certainly due to an intelligent will.⁴²

Only questions answerable by the positive method are considered legitimate. Comte makes it clear there is no place for those who continue to ask the wrong questions. They will be eradicated as “all persistence in the theological or metaphysical state” will be “treated as a weakness of brain incapacitating for government.”⁴³

Politically, the emphasis was on the good of the collective, identified as Humanity. Humanity included not only those living, but also those from the past and those not yet born. The singular goal for an individual was to contribute to the cause of Humanity. Those who did not contribute to Humanity would be relegated to burial in the wastelands after death. Drawing inspiration from his estranged mentor, Saint Simon, Comte saw individual liberty as an impediment to progress. Once knowledge has been positivized, there would simply be no room left for dissent: “Anybody who does not obey the orders will be treated by the others as a quadruped.”⁴⁴

Unlike science, which is characterized by an openness to reality and invites critical questions and examination, scientism promotes certainty and demands obedience. The latter attitude became all too common among public health officials and policy makers during the height of the pandemic. In the cases of both masks and vaccines, those who asked questions or showed hesitancy were deemed to be “science deniers” and portrayed as enemies of Humanity. The science was far from settled on either question, but the public was presented with the kind of certainty usually reserved for mathematical proofs. On a common-sense

⁴² Comte, *The Catechism of Positive Religion*, trans. Richard Congreve (3rd ed., London: Ballantyne, Hanson and Co. Printing, 1891), 41.

⁴³ Comte, *The Catechism of Positive Religion*, 25.

⁴⁴ Comte, *Introduction to Positive Philosophy*, 20.

level, people understood that masks could not be simultaneously effective and useless at the same time, yet public officials confidently asserted both within a short period of time. Was the science wrong in March or in April of 2020? Likewise with vaccines. Any regular observer of the news was aware of the great skepticism among public health officials about a vaccine being successfully developed in under a year. Yet, as soon as the vaccine was ready to be deployed, the tone shifted and any questions about a rushed development, including safety and efficacy, were derided as being anti-scientific. For some, the switch from anti- to pro-vaccine was as simple as an election result, again demonstrating the ideological, not scientific, character of the debate. Whether one was hesitant about vaccines (a sizeable portion of the population) or adamantly opposed (a much smaller group), they were lumped into a group of science-denying, selfish citizens worthy of our collective scorn and shunning.⁴⁵ This disregards the fact the vaccines were approved under emergency authorization, the data from the trials was not shared with the public, and the companies responsible were shielded by the government from potential lawsuits. A reasonable person might want to ask a few questions and weigh the potential benefits and drawbacks before lining up for a vaccine. Being dismissed as a conspiracy theorist is not an appropriate response, particularly when the same line was thrown at those who suggested COVID-19 likely originated from a lab leak, not a nearby wet market. In spite of scientific evidence showing gain of function research was a more plausible explanation than anything occurring naturally given both the time span and the highly contagious nature, public health officials arrogantly dismissed the idea.⁴⁶ A scientifically guided response would have been phrased in probabilistic terms and would not have excluded alternative explanations so readily. The impact extends far beyond COVID-19, as the public has now become more skeptical of vaccines in general, many of which have robust scientific evidence supporting their efficacy. As a larger percentage of the population eschews vaccines, including for their children, we are much more likely to see serious outbreaks of diseases that were well under control. In other words, scientism has undermined science and is imperiling the political order.

The prohibition of questions was consistently implemented from the origins of the virus to the efficacy of masks and vaccines. This was operationalized through informal methods

⁴⁵ “[American COVID-19 Vaccine Poll](#),” *2021 African American Research Collaborative*: 31 percent of men and 43 percent of women fit into the “hesitancy” category.

⁴⁶ Cooper and Navarro-Genie, *COVID-19: The Politics of a Pandemic Moral Panic*, 8-9, 12-13.

IN DEFENSE OF CIVILIZATION: SCIENTISM AND THE COVID-19 RESPONSE IN THE U.S.

such as shunning to more formal measures like social media bans and censorship.⁴⁷ The rationale for the banning of questions involved invoking science as authority and conflating the official uttering the directives with science itself.⁴⁸ The materialistic worldview was apparent through the consistent, singular focus on saving lives from the virus, as if not dying from a particular virus was the pinnacle of existence. It was also evident through things like restrictions on church gatherings at the same time “essential businesses” like McDonald’s and liquor and tobacco stores remained opened.

Some have seemingly taken the approach of selective amnesia to move past the negative impacts of the last several years. Apologies from public health officials, or mere acknowledgement of being wrong, have not been forthcoming and some even seem to think they did a fine job. In other words, there is a lack of acknowledgment that a problem even exists. However, if we are to rely on the science, meaning actual evidence, we will see that society is doing worse on a host of measures since the onset of the pandemic. Barring an unforeseen medical breakthrough, COVID-19 will be around for decades to come, and while mask mandates have been reintroduced in select locations for subsequent outbreaks, a repeat of widespread lockdowns due to COVID-19 is unlikely.⁴⁹ However, with the same officials in power and seemingly little, if any, lessons learned, citizens should be seriously concerned about what will happen during future crises. As bad as things were, we were fortunate that COVID-19 proved to be relatively insignificant for the vast majority of those who got it and that natural immunity from infection proved to be fairly robust. The rapid development of vaccines undoubtedly saved many lives as well. The United States, and the world, are likely to face greater challenges in the near future, particularly in the form of astonishing advances in Artificial Intelligence and the impacts of Climate Change. It is also not difficult to imagine the deliberate weaponization of a virus given the vulnerabilities demonstrated during the COVID-19 crisis.

⁴⁷ Mark Zuckerberg recently admitted that Meta (Facebook) censored COVID-19 content that questioned, or ridiculed, the government’s response; see Gnaneshwar Rajan and Nandita Bose, “[Zuckerberg says Biden administration pressured Meta to censor COVID-19 content](#),” *Reuters*, August 27, 2024.

⁴⁸ In response to criticisms, Dr. Fauci said the following: “If you are trying to get at me as a public health official and a scientist, you’re really attacking not only Dr. Anthony Fauci, you’re attacking science”; Robby Soave, “[Anthony Fauci Says His Critics Are Attacking Science Itself](#),” *Reason*, June 9, 2021.

⁴⁹ Kramer, “Dillard University orders masking as COVID cases rise in Louisiana.”

CURE OR PALLIATIVE CARE?

What should we make of these challenges in light of what we just experienced with COVID-19? Unfortunately, Eric Voegelin's characterization of scientism, made over 75 years ago, still holds true today:

The damage of scientism is done.... The insane have succeeded in locking the sane in the asylum. From this asylum no physical escape is possible. As a consequence of the interlocking science and social power, the political tentacles of scientific civilization reach into every nook and corner of an industrialized society, and with increasing effectiveness stretch over the whole globe.... What is left is hope—but hope should not obscure the realistic insight that we who are living today shall never experience freedom of spirit in society.⁵⁰

The disease of scientism has metastasized within the United States over the last century, spreading well beyond social science departments to society at large. Liberalism has proven no match for scientism and in some ways has proven to be an ally. The response to COVID-19 was rooted in fear, with the goal seemingly being mere survival. In most cases, state and local governments found a compliant citizenry ready to take orders, in large part due to fear, but also because of the lack of goals beyond material wealth and physical health. Religion seems to be in no position to counter it, with a consistent decline in church attendance and belief in God.⁵¹ The education system was long ago transformed by it. What's left is resistance at the individual level. Little enclaves of sanity can be created within households, communities, and perhaps even local and state governments.⁵² Elected officials should not abdicate responsibility during times of crisis. Experts such as epidemiologists, climatologists, and computer scientists are not elected and often have relatively narrow expertise, with very little knowledge of politics. While they can provide useful information and insight into particular issues, they should not make decisions about what policies to ultimately pursue. In times of uncertainty, prudential judgment, guided by common sense experience, should be paramount in policy decisions. A remarkable feature of COVID-19 was the uniformity of policy responses. Out of fear, ignorance, or perhaps incompetence, too many "leaders" were happy to simply follow what others were doing or what the CDC recommended, often

⁵⁰ Voegelin, "The Origins of Scientism," *Social Research* 15, no. 4 (December 1948): 494.

⁵¹ Jeffrey M. Jones, "Belief in God in U.S. Dips to 81%, a New Low," *Gallup*, June 17, 2022.

⁵² The Eric Voegelin Society serves as one such example. For 40 years, it has sustained such a community.

IN DEFENSE OF CIVILIZATION: SCIENTISM AND THE COVID-19 RESPONSE IN THE U.S.

without citing scientific evidence and almost always without a broader perspective of policy implications. Even worse, instead of respecting and encouraging others to use their best judgment and devise alternative solutions, those who stepped outside of the typical response guidance were often ridiculed and demonized, both by the media and other public officials.⁵³ This kind of approach simply will not work with challenges such as A.I. and climate change.

Elected officials should certainly not ignore advice from public health experts, climatologists, computer engineers, or other experts relevant to the issue in question, but must weigh it against other priorities in society. They also should expect to receive evidence for the policy prescriptions they receive from others. Public officials should be forthcoming in what they do, and do not know, in times of crises. Clearly communicating that knowledge, or lack thereof, to the public should be of paramount importance. The media has an obligation to facilitate that communication, although it would be foolish to rely exclusively on them to do so. Direct communication is preferable, but only when there is something to actually say. For example, giving daily reports on COVID-19 hospitalizations and cases was not only unhelpful, but counterproductive, especially since no other data or context was included to demonstrate the impact of the lockdown policies. An honest assessment would have included not just how many were dying from COVID-19 but also how many businesses had closed, crime rates, and the host of other impacts previously documented. To convince the public to take a vaccine, it would be prudent to start by reminding them of the overwhelmingly positive impact vaccines have had on society since their inception (polio would be a good choice for an example). However, just as importantly, it should be communicated that all vaccines have side effects, some known and others not. Likewise, with new vaccines, it is important to emphasize the lack of long-term data on both side effects and efficacy. Had this approach been taken, we might not have descended into the unprecedented levels of distrust in each other and our government.⁵⁴ That lack of trust, along with the negative feelings accompanying it, make successful navigation of future crises even more unlikely. As Voegelin warned, the temptation to fall from uncertain truth to certain untruth is particularly alluring in modernity, so any solution must encompass a sense of

⁵³ At the state level, this was no more evident than in Florida when Governor Ron DeSantis reopened schools in the fall of 2020, while all other states maintained limits on in-person instruction. Florida was seemingly held to different standards in media reports from then on.

⁵⁴ “[Public Trust in Government: 1958-2024](#),” *Pew Research Center*, June 24, 2024.

PIETAS

humility and an acknowledgement of the unknowns.⁵⁵ Philosophy and science both have truth as their goals, but it is important to remember human knowledge is always provisional and subject to error. Likewise, there is more to life than simply surviving.

⁵⁵ Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 83.