

## **RATIONALISM, RISK AND RIDICULE – EXPERTS, SCEPTICS AND THE MARK OF THE ‘BLOB’**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article offers a perspective on the debate about experts and their value. It considers why expert claims for attention are often regarded as suspect. It does so by reflecting on the work of Arendt, Oakeshott, and Scruton. It notes that decision makers can easily find themselves in a bind - sometimes railing against experts, like those presumed to inhabit an education ‘Blob’ in the UK - and at other times seemingly becoming dependent upon them, as in ‘the Science’ and public health. It draws attention to the character of the distaste for scepticism about experts within education, and to the intellectual origin of that scepticism itself. It highlights the alleged contradictions in the minds of sceptics especially where they want to conserve or draw strength from inherited social norms, and yet at the same time regard them as a dehumanising trap. It suggests that the contradiction can be overcome by distinguishing between their concerns about the dangers of rationalism, and their rooted attachment to reason and reasonableness. It invites practitioners to take a principled interest in risk and in its resistance to elimination. It suggests that ridicule can be healthy in so far as it deftly challenges complacency amongst *experts and practitioners alike*.

### **EXPERTS, STATUS, AND POWER**

Dismissing experts without discriminating judgment, and regardless of their quality, is plainly as misguided as according them some special standing without rigorous scrutiny. Yet keeping a sense of proportion about their worth is often hard. This is especially so when they are either demonised as politically inspired propagandists, or alternatively used as weapons against the darker versions of denier populism – whether actual or merely claimed. This isn’t easy for either practitioners or publics. The balanced position is desirably sceptical – neither wilfully suspicious, nor readily awed, and always searching. It will be unafraid of teasing good humour. Whilst sceptics will oppose rationalist attachments, they will always look to calibrate the value of particular experts, and their evidence,

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forensically. They will be reluctant to adopt generalised conclusions and will not be disposed to put reason and reasonableness at risk. They will not allow their scepticism to become so promiscuous as to slip into treating bad arguments just as though they might be good.

Anyhow, here are a few questions, the answers to which will lead us to the important work of Arendt, Oakeshott, and Scruton. First, why do some practitioners fulminate against criticism of experts by politicians like Michael Gove in the first place? In part, it is because it is assumed that the public treats the title of expert as automatically worthy of attention and respect. An expert *knows what counts when others don't; shows what to do, and what not to do; and has the capacity to resolve tough problems*. It is assumed that the expert will invariably affect the inexpert or untutored positively – thus gaining sufficient superiority to command power, reputational dignity, and remunerative acclamation. To disparage experts is then held to be dangerously irrational, and populist too where the term is applied to *everything of which I disapprove; whose origins I am unwilling to confront; and whose human concerns I refuse to understand or tackle*.

Most people prefer to feel respected, whether in reality they are or not. Where educators persuade themselves that they are not heard, or are somehow undervalued, or not trusted, or otherwise deserve some special advantage, they join a scramble for verbal tags like ‘expert’ to bolster their status against that of others. They do so whether there is evidence that its achievement would have any beneficial consequence for learners or not. They treat the epithet ‘expert’ or ‘researcher’ as a tradeable commodity – a form of frantic credentialism deployed in a struggle for public profile and resource advantage. People who want to be heard are often not listening.

Any sceptical critic, who is nonetheless sympathetic to the practice of teaching, will regard the title ‘expert’ as a tricky term to which the unnecessarily underconfident aspire. It is imperious in outlook – unlike the more modest terms ‘specialist’, or ‘exemplar of a craft’ like acting or leadership. It has the potential to farm value whether justified or not. Yet a profession does not alone make the practitioner an expert. In so far as educators seek to give the impression that they are all possessed of expert capabilities, and in the same degree, they do themselves, and those they serve, no credit. Their position is merely self-regarding. In an open society, providers cannot reasonably dictate the grant of social kudos. Wanting the respect presumed of other professions is no basis for developing your own.

### **PRACTICE AND PRIVILEGE**

Second, why do some react adversely to any challenge to experts in communities of practice? They do so, again in part, because they sense that sceptics see these

communities as protective opinion networks. In this they are not wrong. If you claim to be expert you enter into communion with colleagues in a self-sustaining bubble designed for mutual reputational gain – an elite that has the strength to exclude as well as to influence ‘ordinary’ minds. Joining such a collective offers the prospect of adding lustre to a practitioner’s own standing simply by association. It makes it easier to live in comfort with your own prejudices, opinions, and beliefs. It carries the risk of becoming less inclined to reflect, think and be subject to credible evidential review. Those ‘others’ outside the defensive carapace may be treated as ignorant, stupid or deplorable. Their tastes offend and agonise the elite.

None of this is surprising given the prevailing cultural preference (at least in the West) for incontinent emotionalism; divisive identity-mongering; witless ‘passion’; and greedy self-realisation, as opposed to public duty. Overall, the sceptic will always be on the alert for the temper of easy comfort in an expert – the sort that is regressive, complacent, slovenly, and very far from radical. As always, self-pride and personal passion risk walking with privilege in ways wholly removed from the humble, dispassionate, and respectful.

If the title of expert is claimed, then it surely must be earned. It must have demonstrable effect and be free of any post-modernist disinclination to take truth seriously. The title cannot simply be appropriated as something justifying permanent attribution. It isn’t gained just because a practitioner works hard, spends time and effort in a particular field, and feels entitled to recognition. Sharing a disposition derived from mutually reinforcing exchanges untroubled by rigorous scrutiny is common, but not the mark of genuine expertise. The expert must expect to be tested and to face contradiction – or otherwise risk redundancy.

The collisions of experts and sceptics arise from other directions too. Thus, educators and decision-makers in the UK often view one another with profound perplexity. Many educators can seem resistant to proposals for change unless they conform to ‘*what teachers want*’, as though that were readily identifiable, professionally motivated (as opposed to Union or employment driven), and capable of cutting through to public consciousness. From this optic, change and improvement face a professional mind-set that appears wedded to operational overcomplication and risk aversion. It is easy to dismiss.

It does not help when practitioners give little or no credit for the very considerable increases in taxpayer funding devoted to education whatever the colour of the central government administration over at least two decades. However, for their part, and in their own version of a private world, policy makers can appear to give scant consideration to the distinctive motivators amongst practitioners in schools, FE and Universities; to the physically and intellectually demanding character of their roles; to the complexity of the environments in which they operate; and to the rigours of development within, and for, professional lives.

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Where social deference has all but evaporated; society has become greatly more open and diverse; and the (un)social media rule, public expectations of educators and education increase exponentially – and it becomes ever harder to meet them. Actually, the same difficulty confronts elected politicians. Policy ambitions collide so that, for example, the scope for de-centralising decisions about resource allocation and use on the one hand, cannot be reconciled with vehement opposition to any ‘postcode lottery’ on the other.

### **PERCEPTION, RESEARCH, POLICY, AND ‘THE BLOB’**

In so fluid a context, it would be useful if research, and the associated experts, were in good standing. So, do the products of ‘expert’ educational research command attention and respect? HE offers much that is distinguished. UK education departments mine data from the OECD, inspectorates, and awarding bodies extensively. Practitioner leadership is increasing. Yet sadly, and in general, the record is mixed. The absence of educational institutions like the Royal Colleges in medicine enfeebles liaison between research, policy, and practitioner. Results are often presented in drearily inaccessible language, ideologically disconnected from political reality. They feature matters of no evident relevance to learners or otherwise offer insights too late to affect policy at all. Efforts are repeatedly made to tackle this, but facing adverse perception squarely is at least a stimulus to raising the game.

That also means recognising that policy-makers may perceive the tone of educational research as statist or welfarist – keener on paralysing distractions than on seeking solutions to tough problems, and resistant to numerical analysis too. In parallel, sceptics will always deprecate research suggestive of profound insight which merely promotes a cosy mood of lofty cynicism. They will reject pathways to ‘fair’ outcomes from positions which ignore conflicting interpretations of what counts as fair, or contradictions in other concepts implicit in notions of social justice. Too often research gives the impression that social good can only be achieved by a monoculture of central and local government. Too often social mobility is cast as solely for the academically competent – a form of ‘fairness’ that kicks away the ladder to recognition, dignity and advancement for those with different attributes.

For critical sceptics, educational initiatives or outcomes can never be wholly equitable – whether by reference to systems, organisations or some abstract ideal standard. For them, equitable outcomes can only be achieved by suppressing innovation, individuality, opportunity, and diversity of institutional provision. So, sceptics disparage any tendency amongst educators to bewail intrusions into what teachers teach, and how they teach, as though there were no professional or public

interest in how learning or best practice is promoted and different merits recognised. Practitioners and researchers may argue that the history of post-war education policy in the UK exhibits a preference for raw market ideology and a denial of social welfare and well-being. However, for the sceptic, the argument is simply unsustainable: alternative policy prescriptions are either absent, biased to the academic, inchoate, or electorally untenable.

In any event, public policy towards education in the UK has featured a clear direction of travel over three decades and the results have been far from unfruitful. Teachers are not yet required to indoctrinate or to tell learners precisely what to think. The public expect that they will act on a vocational commitment to help young people to learn and live well whatever the circumstances they face. All UK governments want practitioners to improve the value generated from taxpayer funding in the interests of the economy, society, and individuals. Certainly, sceptics would not accept that the solution to all the ills facing educators – whether real or imagined; whether relating to the condition of capitalism; to COVID; to the ‘supremacist patriarchy’; or species extinction – can be dealt with by holistic transformation, or anything which elevates educational priorities ahead of any others.

Sceptics will always emphasise that the fragility implicit in the social construction of expert educational research inevitably risks a negative mind set – at the extreme, that of a turgid ‘Blob’. And this is what famously exercised Michael Gove, and attendant Special Advisers (Montrose42 Blog 2013). He applied the label to a group of 100 academics as ‘enemies of promise’ – a term used by Cyril Connolly (1948). A natural sceptic, Gove saw the sociology of much educational research as fuelling disappointment, and resistant to change and challenge.

More broadly sceptics point up that where people feel especially threatened, by nuclear or climate annihilation, pandemic or economic collapse or anything else, they cry out for certainties. They seek complete safety or protection from risk, and expect that experts will deliver. Treating experts this way typically concedes ground to powerful institutional and personal authority. In turbulent times, the outsider, critic, or troublesome sceptic will always face hostility, a clamour for national safety, and for urgent expedients (regardless of unintended results). Yet their voices are critical to preserving the very openness of mind, trade and society that offers the best prospect of innovating and confronting significant threats successfully. That is so, providing that the balance between winners and losers is not lost in the transition (something instinctive liberals can easily overlook).

Moreover, a longing for certainty and timid deference to the expert walks hand in hand with casual derision for those who have to grapple with risk, confusion and despair. Sceptics will reserve special disapprobation for those who never risk themselves at the ballot box, yet who are determined to assert that leading

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politicians of whatever party are anti-teacher. Whatever else they do; politicians do not court the disapproval of whole professions.

In fact, activist Ministers like Kenneth Baker under Margaret Thatcher in the late 80s, David Blunkett under Tony Blair in the late 90s, and Michael Gove under David Cameron in the early 20s have all sought to extend the reach of educators and enable them to promote higher standards and learners’ personal fulfilment. So too have the overwhelming majority of education Ministers and regulators in central and devolved government – and politicians in local government too. It may be that for some, these achievements can never be regarded as well-founded or worth having because ideologically unsound. But that is largely meretricious and tendentious posturing – a propaganda of evasion and contempt.

The record of respect for educators can be read in long lists. Here is one: the entitlements created for learners through the national curriculum; the associated and serious attention given to assessment; the efforts to provide school leaders with greater autonomy over policy and budgets; the use of targets to raise expectations; the ramping up of funding per pupil; the major increase in teacher numbers; the efforts to reduce class sizes; the great increase in teacher pay; the expansion of the academies programme and the introduction of free schools (in England); the efforts to broaden options to recognise and to equip learners to navigate an uncertain world; the determination to achieve greater rigour in examination and qualification design; and the willingness to promote teaching as a regulated profession.

This is not the whole story, and not everything has been an immediate success – or ever could have been. However, from the perspectives of many policy makers, and politicians of both left and right, every effort to improve and reform has been met by resistance from apparently ‘expert’ educators. In acrimony, practitioners cry, *‘Get off my back, but tell me precisely what to do’*. Thus, Michael Gove’s use of the ‘Blob’ label gave expression to the frustrations of policy makers about the perceived inclinations of some teaching Unions, local authorities, academics, and some educators to act as a drag on constructive improvement. He wasn’t the originator of the term, and those who use it consider it to be wholly undeserving of outrage. That said, it is worth responding to ridicule by explaining why it is unjustified, in so far as it may be, in ways that are compelling and command general public respect. Unfortunately, or fortunately, no such response has so far been especially audible.

### **EXPERTS, INDEPENDENCE, POLICY MAKING, AND MYTH**

Next, is there a credible and substantial challenge to scepticism – something that goes beyond the observation that criticism of the expert can be taken just too far, and even to indiscriminate stereotyping or the lunacies of conspiracy mania? This

line might well have some justified traction given the evidence for dysfunctional relationships between researchers, experts, specialists and decision makers within the UK governmental system.

Aside from Michael Gove's (2020) recent remarks on the performance of the British civil service, anyone who has the patience to read the reports of the National Audit Office (and the parallel organisations for the devolved governments) cannot but be overwhelmed by the post-war litany of disasters in public policy-making within the UK (King and Crew 2013). They feature incompetent change and project management; insouciance about risk management; woefully inadequate procurement practice; and waste on an epic scale. They do not encourage confidence that tax will be well used, whether governments raise more or less.

From the misuse of intelligence prior to the invasion of Iraq under Blair; to the treatment of immigration from EU accession states early in the millennium; to failed financial regulation under Brown; to the confusions over policy towards the EU under Cameron and May; to the struggle to achieve a coherent response to COVID-19 under Johnson, the truly troubling factor has lain not only in the weakness of expert advice, but in the inability of professional specialists and decision makers to achieve reliable judgment, purpose, and action.

So, a concern about scepticism towards experts might be justified if it gets in the way of responding to the immense pressures for timely decision in massively contested public landscapes where the chances of mis-step carry the highest of stakes. Experts, practitioners, and decision makers share responsibility for public policy outcomes. The character of that relationship would be transformed if its features were more thoroughly transparent and the lessons of failure more determinedly learned. Following O'Neill (2017), experts and decision makers alike might reflect that it would be useful to overcome mutual incomprehension and suspicion by working on their relationships. That would entail a shift from a simplistic demand to be accorded trust, to the mutual and disciplined cultivation of trustworthiness.

Yet it is not at all obvious that the relationship can improve without the sharpness of scorn that draws attention to the differences of perspective in the first place. Indeed, it is hard to withhold ridicule from one particular line of argument. This comes from those who consider that an expert generally has a claim to reliability. Distrusting democracy, they will often argue that the very quality of expertise makes the case for detaching problems of public policy from politics altogether. It is often said that educational practice and policy would best be carried out 'independently' of government (whether central, local, or devolved) on terms mimicking arrangements that currently apply for the health service in England or the Bank of England – in so far as they are likely to last, which can hardly be assumed.

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Thus, it is claimed that teachers of history are assessors of events not historians for government; that all educational experts should practise in the same mould; and that the institutions of government should preserve the distinction. At the same time, it is implied that if decision-makers were all expert educators, public benefit would be guaranteed. The suggestion glides easily into arguments in favour of bringing practitioners into policy-making roles within government departments, or likewise experienced specialists capable of working on particular problems or techniques without preconceptions. These are usually valid, and generally useful initiatives. They do not give rise to the same issues as those attaching to presumptions about experts and expertise. Nor do they address the besetting disconnection between policy making and practical implementation in the UK.

The policy problems confronting democratic government are rarely, if ever, patient of treatment from one professional perspective alone. Trade-offs abound. Someone may command respect as an expert in one field and people may assume it to be reliable for others. But this is usually a mistake - a form of transference when the public pressure for solutions and certainty is overwhelming. Moreover, the skills needed in educational settings and related research are not the same as those needed in government. It is not that they cannot be transferred in either direction it is simply that the capability differences, and the difficulties of adapting them to unfamiliar contexts, need to be recognised frankly.

Moreover, attempts to claim that policy is led by ‘the Science’ in the COVID-19 pandemic have again exposed the awkward reality that experts frequently and profoundly disagree. They did so about what could be said to be known about the virus and what not; about transmission dosage; immunity; treatment, and protection. More substantially, although lockdown was ultimately preferred to herd immunity in March 2020, judgments about the implications of operational damage to the NHS, and to the wider economy, could not be made in isolation from one another. Even where experts agree, it does not follow that the public will regard their judgments as legitimate or even tolerable. Ultimately, multiple and conflicting pressures are inescapably for governmental decision even though this should desirably be achieved on terms that are non-binary as between expert and politician.

‘The Science’ is not an institution capable of achieving legitimate and effective governmental decision. It merely refers to contributors to decision making. Civil servants are no longer the sole conduits for advice to Ministers. Rather they ensure that Ministers are fully advised and can take account the competing voices clamouring for attention – expert or not. Indeed, in the UK, no state or devolved education department exists to protect the interests of educators and education where circumstances and priorities determine otherwise. An independent cadre of expert educationalists would never command legitimacy for acutely difficult

decisions which ultimately demand balanced judgments of practical as well as political risk. To assert otherwise is to indulge disingenuity and myth.

Moreover, decision by unelected experts is no more defensible than decision by unelected bureaucrats. Claiming the right to steer decision on the basis of some expertise or other without being troubled by plural voices; getting it wrong; grandstanding for personal reputational effect; and then sneering at politicians when they take the tough decisions, is hardly defensible either. This is emphatically not to say that experts or specialists have no role in policy formation, only that they cannot claim to exclude diverse voices and needs, or that their assessments are absolute and invariably reliable. Experts cannot monopolise judgment. Sceptical detachment and pragmatism are the only sound bases for government.

### **EXPERTS, TRUST, AND THE LAW**

By way of further illustration consider the GCSE and A Level grade awards for in 2020. Every relevant ministry in the UK (Conservative; SNP in Scotland; Labour/LibDem in Wales; DUP/SF in Northern Ireland, and associated qualification regulators) adopted arrangements for balancing teacher assessment with moderation prior to August 2020, and then abandoned them within hours. One reading of what happened (only one) is that the expert regulators were reluctant to drop an established preference for socially distanced examinations at the moment when the concerns of teachers and parents made them unsustainable.

The regulators also failed to devise an award and appeal process that might be saleable for whole cohorts but could never command public credibility at the level of some individual schools or students. The wholesale abandonment apparently occurred regardless of the risks for higher education, grade inflation, employer decisions, and also for successor learners in 2021. Given that this sort of interpretation of events has gained traction, and quickly, the public can hardly be expected to trust education experts without equivocation.

In any event, pure professional autonomy simply does not exist – not even for judicial activists. It is always bounded. Whether education is publicly funded, directly or indirectly, or privately financed, it has necessarily to be moderated by disciplines of accountability that are intrinsic to professional effectiveness and legitimacy. The claim, *trust me I'm a teacher and an expert whose marking can relied upon*, will ultimately cut no ice with governments and the public (whatever assessment arrangements are determined for 2021 and beyond) when teachers' commitments to their learners leave them fundamentally conflicted. Few would tolerate a lawyer to be judge and jury in a client's own cause. Only the wilfully obtuse would be content with a static marking system permitting neither upward

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pressure on examination and assessment standards over time, nor any policy towards grade inflation.

Furthermore, much suspicion of ‘expert’ opinion arises because it is often generated not by experts at all, but by individuals working in organisations funded by special interests determined to muster political pressure for particular results. Very obviously, competing, and often lurid, expert claims marked the referendum campaigns on Scottish independence and departure from the EU. Creating narratives aimed at changing attitudes in mass populations, coupled with activities designed to spark sympathy for related goal achievement, is their stock in trade. It is assisted by lazy journalism. They may simply be ‘sock puppets’ serving unaccountable money focused on policy positioning and media management. They may be charitable bodies cynically disinclined to let public paranoia go to waste and using it as a fundraising lever. They may be client entities masquerading as independent, yet supporting government policy in exchange for public funding. They are evident where political systems are emergent, or under strain. Following Gove (2017), these are perhaps the kind of experts of which the public might have had ‘enough’.

Whilst it is claimed that policy should be evidence ‘based’ or ‘informed’, this may covertly disregard problems of origin, cogency and quality. Indeed, the pressure for ‘impact’ in academia or think-tanks may itself act as a distraction from evidential frailty. Thus, COVID epidemiological modelling was not early subject to full multi-disciplinary review. ‘Publish or perish’ may favour media profile over rigorous research or scholarship. Notwithstanding the disparate mechanisms designed to promote good practice, there is no one Academy of Experts for education as for some Court experts; no advance training; no relevant duty in Teachers Standards (DfE England 2017); no performance monitoring; and no disclosure requirements. So, expert claims can evade review. This matters. Much educational research uses interpretivist method which, in the hands of the incautious, and despite its strengths, is vulnerable to misplaced inference, evasive treatment of correlation, and inflated conclusions.

In the UK, the law (1975; 2012) distinguishes between ordinary witnesses who often find it difficult to distinguish fact from inference, and an expert having the specialist knowledge to give an informed opinion on evidence put before the Court. Experts have power. Accordingly, the Courts are bound to test the depth and quality of the knowledge claimed; its relevance; its reliability; and whether it is fair to admit that opinion. The function – indeed the duty - of the expert before the Courts is to present information that is likely to be outside the experience of judge or jury. It must be evidence which helps the Court to reach its own independent conclusions. Governments, parliaments, and publics have an analogous need.

Neither Government nor Court is bound by expert evidence. The fact that an expert has impressive qualifications does not automatically make his or her opinion any more helpful than that of judge or jurors themselves: although, in the caustic observation of one authority, there is a danger that the expert may think it does. Expert evidence may be ruled inadmissible where it is neither objective nor impartial. Experts have a duty to be unbiased. There must be a reliable body of knowledge to underpin the evidence they give and they must not testify beyond their expertise. They must not overstate their knowledge, make improper inferences, misstate uncertainty, or misrepresent the methods by which 'expert' information was obtained, and so mislead the Court. They must not evade proper disclosure of sources. They must not use loose language, nor indulge in speculative opinion.

These are high bars for conduct in the political domain. However, the frequency with which they are not met, and the limited penalties for failure, make it inevitable that scepticism about expert claims will inevitably arise. Its strength will depend on just how far experts fall short of the Courts' standards and those expected in public life. No one would expect every expert should be under some absolute or statutory obligation to assist the government to come to conclusions on any matter. But nor should they be protected from assessment against the Seven Principles of Public Life (the 'Nolan' Principles) if they do, or do not.

These principles have been current since 1995; Selflessness; Honesty; Objectivity; Accountability; Leadership; Integrity; and Openness and should be evident in every educational researcher's practice. They are also integral to defining the educator's function to sustain the public interest. That includes putting the needs of learners first; maintaining standards and quality; and upholding professional reputation. All these principles are critical to any claim to be professional, and to evaluating expert opinion in education or anything else. Politicians and the wider public will use them, and it is to be expected that their application should, and will, reveal practice that is less than satisfactory and undeserving of respect.

## **LANGUAGE, RATIONALISM, AND PERFECTION**

Some words do seem to act as cat nip for some commentators and practitioners. That is perhaps to be expected given that education policy occupies heavily contested political territory. For example, some express a loathing for Margaret Thatcher's remark that there is 'no such thing as society'. This is regardless of the words she actually used (1987) which stressed the importance of personal human agency and social engagement. Others detest the term 'Blob' as applied to some 'expert' educationalists without thinking of its nuanced substance. It is always worth pausing to assess why these kinds of words excite attention.

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One way of doing this is by considering the work of Hannah Arendt, Michael Oakeshott, and Roger Scruton. All three would resist conventional labels of left or right. They might better be called penetrating contrarians, but that is not adequate either. All three had firm attachments to the notion of society and community whilst simultaneously being critical of their flaws. All three drew attention to the progenitors of violence, especially when confronting the horrors of anti-Semitism, Nazism and Communism. Their careers took them variously to Princeton, LSE, Birkbeck, and Buckingham. They remind us that sceptical misgivings about group-think and confirmation bias have a lengthy pedigree.

Ideas of societal progress and perfectibility are ever with us. Caution about them always rankles with those who see their lives as being not just about contributing to social cohesion, but to actually achieving an ideal-type of social progress – demolishing social barriers to mobility and change in favour of communitarian objectives. From many standpoints those may have honourable and vivid features. However, their treatment in the political domain can readily become perverse and highly volatile – disregarding the complexities of rights, justice, and ethical judgment. Sceptics pay attention to this. They express reservations about our capacity to handle them peaceably in ways that are practical and politically adroit. They reject sentimental optimism as being inimical to the requirements of effectively functioning open, and democratic, political systems.

The roots of this caution lie in reactions to the enlightenment during the eighteenth century. When asked what he thought of the French Revolution, Mao Tse Tung may famously have remarked that it was too soon to say. It is hardly too soon now. Some of its features involved a violent attack on conventional tradition and religion and were linked to beliefs in the possibility of human perfectibility and in the achievement of an ideal society. Progress mattered above all, however defined. For Robespierre nothing could be allowed to get in the way of ‘The Republic of Virtue’. The guillotine had a cleansing function, and a bloody one.

So, the ‘enlightenment’ certainly had its dark side. Himmelfarb (2008) gives a graphic analysis of the consequences. If terror was needed to get results, then so be it. Speaking of education and reflecting Rousseau’s injunction to change human nature and transform each and every individual come what may, Robespierre commented of schools, *‘I am convinced of the necessity of bringing about a complete regeneration, and, if I may express myself so, of creating a new people.’* The reign of virtue for Rousseau would make ‘particular wills’ conform to the ‘general will’ without making clear what this sublimation of the individual would actually entail, and what constraints would exist on its exercise. In this there is ‘virtue signalling’ on steroids – uncritical, unreflective, self-righteous, and ultimately brutal.

Rationalism of this kind – determined to bend the world to a tidy, consistent, uniformity – is a perversion of reason and reasonableness. It seeks to mimic the

eternity of a Kingdom of God on earth. As Cohn (1970) shows it is not something that can be wholly detached from the history of millennium cults of all forms that have erupted in the West from time to time before the eighteenth century – and, one might add, since.

In Britain, the reaction to the Revolution was complex, but ultimately a preference for adaptive evolution won out over radical dislocation, as Burke (2014) urged, it should. It was cemented culturally by various forms of religious revivalism and charitable benevolence. By contrast the American Revolution was marked by the collective intellectual effort of the Republic's Founders: they valued freedom above all partly because they had sought religious liberty by leaving Europe in the first place. The realities of power in all three settings were not unmarked by ugliness, but in broad terms, and in both Britain and America, there emerged a political culture preferring the empirical and practical over the deductive and dogmatic. Rationalism remains unconscionable for those who are not easily labelled left or right, but who are sceptics by temper and in judgment.

## **ARENDT, MOBILISATION, AND TERROR**

For Arendt (1958) in particular, societies and communities of whatever sort are both an inevitable historical necessity and a potential trap. Humanity needs social engagement but can also be ensnared and perverted by it. She is especially fluent on the pathways to totalitarian tyranny, terror and autocracy that rest on the foundations of presumed virtue and an itch for rationalist social design. She claims that under conditions of extensive disruption and discontinuity '*..Society always demands that its members act as though they were members of one enormous family which has only one opinion and interest.*'

For her, times of profound change and dislocation threaten to liquidate humane public and private realms and to replace them with a specious equality – a conformity risk intrinsic to damaging any society. At the extreme it features disorientated mass mobilisation in which human agency falls into apathetic servitude to consumption, technology, or terror. It is a social construct that inveigles humanity to abandon the agency to create public and private spaces and their protections, including private property. It demands that they be replaced with forms of conduct and government that risk the extinction of all humane impulses. For her, socialised mankind risks that state of society where prosperity '*..feeds not on the abundance of material goods but on the process of production and consumption itself.*'

Those who claim to have answers to fearful uncertainty, and to command progress, set up a notion of society that tends to become devouring, all embracing, controlling, rule obsessed and exclusive. Left alone it has the capacity to suck

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people into compliance; to dehumanise; to suppress truth and to mobilise poison and propaganda. The guardians of public safety make sure that their interests prevail: the rest experience a collective Stockholm Syndrome. Lest it be thought that Arendt’s risk assessment was misplaced, consider the millions of deaths from the Long March in China; the holocaust of the Jews in Nazi Germany; the murder of tens of millions in Soviet Russia; the equally savage outcome of the invasion of China by Japan in the 1930s; the genocide in Rwanda – and more besides.

Yet at the heart of her thinking there remained a seeming contradiction. She was against personalising emotion and introspection. She asserted that human relationships become real only in action; in the exercise of freedom; and in the determination to create or preserve public space where reason and reasonableness can flourish. She didn’t think that relationships grow naturally, but rather that they are constructed actively by individuals. On the one hand, she did not consider that a web of relationships could be challenged without the norms, customs, and standards that make a civilisation: on the other, she saw those same features as overwhelmingly threatening to human intervention and creativity.

Pitkin (1998) makes this contradiction explicit, and she is critical of it. It is she who first described Arendt’s distaste for the risks of appropriation by the social as being analogous to absorption by ‘the Blob’. She suggests that Arendt’s asperity is larded with the language of science-fiction. The ‘social’ becomes ridiculed as an attacking entity from outer space like that featured in a 1950s film itself called ‘*The Blob*’. Pitkin’s criticism rests on conflating Arendt’s critique of rationalism with reason. She teases in ways that question the force of what Arendt had to say, whilst simultaneously respecting most of it. Gove simply follows Arendt.

Overall, sceptics see rationalism is the high-road to absolutism, responding to a craving for certainty (especially from experts). It aspires to total social re-formation, regardless of the implications for individual persons and those they love. However, it is through reason, reasonableness, and moderation in the public space, that what exists can be challenged. It is by applying them that *what is* can be reconciled with *what ought or might be*. Rationalism suppresses our capacity to make balanced judgment. Reason in action, by contrast, rejects a closed society that represses freedom, and cancels persons. It rejects the vilification of what is reasonably thought, written, and said, or of indifference to received opinion. McWhorter has recently written movingly of the dreadful alternatives (2020).

Still, perfectibility and rationalism remain in fashion, almost as echoes of ‘divine right’. This is not just in the West: the Chinese Communist Party expresses the same repressive impulse – a denial of reason or the capacity to exercise reasonable decision for the endlessly variable circumstances of experience. It assumes that everything is always related to everything else; that no discontinuities exist or can occur; that no subtle discrimination of judgment is tolerable; that

attachments to abstract terms of sustainability, precaution; intersectionality, and proportionality will have no unintended consequences and carry no risk.

All this is prompted by one reading of Arendt. There are others. She resists easy interpretation. However, it seems safe to assert that for her the ultimate risk implicit in unyielding pre-occupations with 'society' involves sliding into a denial of reason and reasonableness to substitute totemic rationalism instead – into the risk of promoting perverted and horrific outcomes. It is necessarily authoritarian in enforcing cultural alignment. It insists on conformity with a transformative project animated by slogans and an impatience for truth. It is accompanied by active mobilisation of mobs. As Marcel has it, the person's ontological existence is removed from *being*, and is transferred to *being had* (1945).

### OAKESHOTT, SCRUTON, HABIT, AND 'THE BLOB'

Oakeshott's work (1967) often appears in harmony with Arendt's own. Like her he walks the line between warning against treating society as an idol, whilst also pointing to the significance of informal, free, and even traditional commitments of human engagement. He stresses the value of our 'discovering' habits – like tolerance and enjoyment – rather than thrusting precepts at others. He treats rationalism as something imposed 'top-down', obsessed by preferences for dreams, for statute as opposed to common law, for regulations, and for adherence to powerful elite or expert opinion.

Like Arendt he would regard a passion for experts as simply naïve and egotistical. He implies that the voice that insists on only one judgement as to virtue is the voice of the fanatic that rejects the lessons of experience and inheritance. It treats the past as servant of the present. It requires standards of stewardship for the future that are detached from practical present realities. It is endlessly exhausting in pretending to be incontrovertible. It places no value on agile adaptability; resilience; integrity; or on diversity of thought, opinion, and belief for the management of risk. It dispenses with the very conditions of openness, reason, and orderly rules for decision-making that create the space for spontaneity, technological innovation, and creativity necessary to resolve practical problems.

For Oakeshott (1967), government needs to rest on habits of conduct and behaviour, rather than on personal or other attachments to abstract ideals. For him, adaptive rules of constitutional procedure mattered. He saw '*...politics as an activity in which a valuable set of tools is renovated from time to time and kept in trim rather than an opportunity for perpetual re-equipment.*' He remarked that '*...the intimations of government are to be found in ritual, not in religion or philosophy; in the enjoyment of ordinary peaceable behaviour, not in the search for truth or perfection.*' In so far as governments express utility by reference

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exclusively to ideals and agendas of one sort or another, they give inadequate attention to the benefits of adaptive political culture and have rationalism lurking in potential.

Scruton (2003) comments on the tendency of group-think to curdle into repression are similarly firm. The mind-set he captures is as disturbing as any attacking ‘Blob’. For him, fruitful relationships depend in large measure upon dispassionate good humour and robust, but temperate, ridicule. In consequence, his critique of the flaccid language and savagery of some continental ideologues like Bourdieu, Zizek and Habermas is witty, and devastating. *‘The revolutionary spirit which searches for things to hate has found in Foucault a new literary formula. Look everywhere for power, he tells his readers, and you will find it. Where there is power there is oppression. And where there is oppression there is the right to destroy.’*

Incidentally, Foucault echoes Marcuse (1969) who saw tolerance as everywhere repressive, a bulwark for class dominance and always exclusive rather than inclusive. Neither Scruton nor Oakeshott would accept this simplicity. Neither think that societies can be organised according to a superior plan or goal, or that there is a direction to history, or that moral and spiritual progress has teleological reality. They urge us to check how far the views of experts and theoreticians (sceptics included) shift from analysis to little more than rhetoric.

Indeed, a sceptic would not suppose that even education must have a ‘worthwhile’ purpose defined by some expert authority. Both Scruton and Oakeshott follow Arendt in pressing the importance of what is neither useful nor necessary in education. Some things – like friendship and aesthetics – are valuable for their own sake and vital for personal engagement and public well-being. They would have no difficulty in agreeing that not everything that is measurable matters; in rejecting that only the measurable does; and in challenging elite meritocracy. Scruton simply stresses that people *‘...reason towards a common goal only in times of emergency when there is a threat to be vanquished or a conquest to be achieved. Even then, they need organisation, hierarchy, and a structure of command if they are to pursue their goal effectively. Nevertheless, a form of collective rationality does emerge in these cases, and its popular name is war.’* The rationalist seeks identity in combat for a cause, and cannot resist deploying hate in doing so.

Scruton roundly rejects such viciousness. For him, as for Oakeshott, the obligation to pass on and adapt natural preferences, traditions, and habits is wholly honourable, because they are necessary for the peaceful and successful composition of both present and future. Losing confidence in them leads to impotence. Reinterpreting the past as proof of current iniquity is invariably corrupt. Faced with choosing whether to ‘improve society bit by bit, or rub it out and start again’ (in Scruton’s language), sceptics invariably choose the former.

For public policy, the sceptic prefers the practical - building homes, curing the sick, sustaining security, protecting the vulnerable, combatting poverty, and promoting innovation and enterprise – to instilling ‘acceptable’ attitudes. Departures from some required outlook will ultimately be treated as heretical or blasphemous, demanding reparation, self-abnegation, apology, and ostracism. Where puzzlement exists in the UK about any disconnection between policy and implementation, the sceptic will point to the tendency of modern organisations to require compliance with corporate values to secure instrumental and reputational advantage alone. This is accompanied by the introduction of high-priced leadership, ostensibly to overcome silo-barriers to co-operative resolution of complex problems. However, it also elevates a fixation with attitudinal engineering over engaging with the demands of professional practice and operational delivery, thus making the work of breaking down the barriers to resolving ‘wicked issues’ more difficult.

The sceptic will assert that the more statist and corporate an outlook; the more preoccupied with social justice (especially where it excludes liberty); the more inclined to whole-systems thinking; the more obsessed with provider as opposed to learner interests; and the more attached to uniformity of structure and institution, the more likely will be disappointment, frustration, anger, and underperformance. The sceptical preference is for arrangements that promote accommodations between both people and principles – a state that enables diverse adjustments rather than being the sole provider or arbiter of social and other goods. It asserts that some things are more important than intemperate ambition for social change.

Rationalism for both Oakeshott and Scruton, finds its ultimate expression in socialism, fascism, communism and some forms of nationalism, just as Arendt found it in totalitarianism. Their common origins lie in an impulse to see some actual or predicted event as demanding a total transformation of attitude and action. None of them contend against reason or reasonableness. They do not regard society and culture as necessarily inimical to either – quite the reverse. But they see rationalism as something appropriated by a particular adjustment to culture and society. It is a suffocating embrace – typified as an imperative. It is a perversion of virtue. In language attributed to Gramsci, it demands *a long march of ideologies through the institutions*, the better to take them over – a ‘Blob’ which attacks and consumes. Gove calls this out.

For his part and in considering education, Scruton reflected on the principal features of indoctrination (Scruton, R., Ellis-Jones, A., and O’Keefe 1985). They may be taken as expressive of the rationalist mind, and of the flawed expert. Spot them, and the mark of the ‘Blob’ may reasonably be claimed and subjected to legitimate interrogation and disdain. Interpolating a little, they are as follows.

- *Conclusions are foregone* and not subject to any serious test. The signs for this may be multiple – loaded questions; loaded references; and loaded vocabulary

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in assessment and publications. This is a recurrent problem in all bad ‘interpretivist’ research, and weak peer review.

- *The conclusions form part of a ‘constellation’,* whose meaning is found in a ‘hidden unity’ based on emotional or political attitudes. In effect an inchoate personal or political disposition is elevated into a cause. It values manipulated perception, attitudinal ‘narratives’, and is hostile to reasoned challenge.
- *The conclusions are premises to action,* and form a fundamental starting point for a political ‘programme’ – ostensibly transformative, but actually threatening.
- *The conclusions are also a part of a closed system of mutually confirming dogmas* which serve to consolidate and validate the emotional unity from which it springs. The choir is permitted to sing but one song.
- *Those conclusions are not established by open discussion,* but by closing minds to alternative viewpoints, and by vilifying or denouncing opposition.

### THE FUNCTIONS OF RIDICULE AND CHEERFULNESS

Ridicule and teasing in public life are functional and justifiable, where insulting intimidation and oppression are not. In broad terms, Arendt, Oakeshott and Scruton argue that the consensus, censoriousness and compliance of rationalism should never be permitted to supplant the contestability, civility and compromise implicit in reason and reasonableness. None of them would even remotely feed or favour conspiracy tropes; the denial of evident truth; or frantic cults of left or right. They would agree that peddling any claim of existential threat; of an urgent necessity for total transformation; and of ultimate expert authority, has only one end – and it is violent. It leads to the gulag, expropriation and immiseration. For them all, whatever the claims of ideology or virtue they must never be allowed to become a secular religion policed by threats indistinguishable from charges of heresy and blasphemy. Thus for Oakeshott, *‘Into the heat of our engagements, into the passionate clash of beliefs, into our enthusiasm for saving the souls of our neighbours or all mankind, a government [of restraint] injects an ingredient...of the irony that is prepared to counteract one vice by another, of the raillery that deflates extravagance without itself pretending to wisdom, of the mockery that disperses tension, of inertia and of scepticism.... it is like the ‘governor’ which, by controlling the speed at which its parts move, keeps the engine from racking itself to pieces.’*

Giving offence through acerbic imagery is not always illegitimate. In the theatre of open debate, it is a kind of stage direction. It is arresting. It can prompt people to assess an argument’s credibility, and challenge the falsity and intemperateness of rationalism, in both public and private. The rituals of open

dialogue can be relied upon to self-correct and to moderate courteously if need be, when they are vigorously upheld in active engagement. By contrast a preference for ‘safe space’ and ‘no platforming’ is invariably emblematic of the oppressor. It is inimical to handling risk in an inevitably uncertain world where people have always to face realities of potential failure, disappointment, personal harm, and discomfort.

Any profession worthy of the name needs to grapple with potential public misunderstanding about risk. It must be clear about how it is to be managed, and explained, on any relevant matter of public interest. It must accept the impossibility of its elimination. It must decide how best to communicate the practice of confronting multidimensional uncertainty with integrity and by sustaining openness (Popper 1945). Expert assessment is not necessarily proof against risk. It cannot be expected to be determinative when judgment anyway belongs to collective, political decision. Yet experts, and generalists are condemned to uneasy dialogue. It is sometimes incoherent and could certainly be improved: but haughty and spiky defensiveness about lively linguistic expression is usually no more than pompous.

At most and at best, ridicule has the capacity to puncture self-righteous pretentiousness and shift the focus to what is important. At the very least, it is the source of the kind of amusement which adds to general hilarity and cheerfulness in public life. There is nothing wrong with ridicule that reveals uncomfortable truths and when it is divorced from the motivation of the mob. The image of ‘the Blob’ did that – and does so still. The challenge may be irksome for some, but it deserves a good-humoured and careful response – something rather better than ‘*the rage of Caliban at seeing his own face in a glass*’ (Wilde 1890 quoted from the 1992 Edn.).

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