

BEWARE ANTI-“PSEUDO-SCIENCE” AGITATION

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If we accept an operational definition of “pseudo-science” as whatever any critic of so-called “pseudo-science” probably means, then vehement criticisms of the said “pseudo-sciences” are generally made for one of four reasons:

- 1) To invalidate unworthy ideas, as part of the normal course of science itself — a classic example is the 1989 case of “cold fusion” and its fallout, in the field of condensed matter physics and chemistry
- 2) To celebrate and maintain the middle-class belief that modern society is based on scientific knowledge; to fight against idolatry in the realm of ideas; to participate in improving public discourse and consciousness
- 3) To provide false legitimacy for problematic areas of establishment science that survive owing to systemic financial and professional interests — the preeminent example being establishment medicine (see below)
- 4) To attack a legitimate criticism of a dominant scientific position (collateral attack by appeal to authority or “consensus”, using denigration)

Thus, the full array of motives for engaging in the sport of “pseudo-science” bashing spans a spectrum from good scientific practice to ordinary social behaviour in structured society to support for organized fraud to outright base competition that is incompatible with the science ideal. Here, I outline the last three reasons, as follows. A longer version of this article, with references, will be published elsewhere.

Popular support for establishment science as state religion

Given the epidemic lack of understanding of science concepts, it is not surprising that there is a wide array of beliefs that are at odds with the school lessons about science, including: astrology, “intelligent design”, “free energy”, “orgone”, “creation biology”, and homeopathy.

Realistically, virtually all citizens are entirely unable to critically evaluate what we take as scientific truth regarding public policy and regulatory questions. Thus, “public education” means state propaganda. We are reduced to “scientists have concluded” or “there is a scientific consensus that” and so on.

Systemically, from an operational perspective, establishment science is a state religion. It is not anchored in empirical evidence that can be evaluated by the non-expert individual using reason and intellectual discernment. It frames and supports the established order. It provides legitimacy to government programs. It purports to appease our deepest quests for meaning, and supplies a creationist mythology (cosmology, string theory, and so on). Its high priests are venerated and occupy top ranks in the class hierarchy.

Ordinary well-educated citizens have invested in many beliefs delivered by establishment science, and have integrated these beliefs into their personal identities. It is therefore natural that middle-class and professional-class individuals have a learned and reflexive impulse to attack “pseudo-science”. These attacks can be individual or can coalesce via the animal behavioural collective phenomenon known as mobbing.

Legitimacy for problematic areas of establishment science

A stunning example is the organized barrage of criticism and legislation against largely benign and harmless “alternative medicine”, intended to imply that establishment medicine — said to be scientifically sound — is the only trustworthy system for repairing individual health.

The problem here is that establishment medicine is anything but shaped by objectively evaluated empirical evidence, and anything but scientifically sound. The eminent medical researcher Dr. John P.A. Ioannidis has demonstrated that “most published research findings are false”.

In North America, between 6% and 8% of citizens will be killed by medical errors of all types. In just one area of establishment medicine, Professor Dr. Peter C. Gøtzsche has come to the point of flatly concluding that long term use of psychiatric drugs causes more harm than good. In his words, based on a decade of research: “Psychiatric drugs are responsible for the deaths of more than half a million people aged 65 and older each year in the Western world, as I show below. Their benefits would need to be colossal to justify this, but they are minimal. ... Overstated benefits and understated deaths...”.

Attacking legitimate criticisms of establishment positions

Climate science has major domestic and geopolitical implications. It is routine to attack critics as immoral or crazy, and for influential actors and groups to seek legal instruments of intimidation and enforcement. The Wikipedia list of “pseudo-sciences” includes “climate change denial”.

This is a remarkable inclusion because many high-profile establishment climate scientists expressly reject the so-called “consensus”, including: Judy Curry (Georgia Institute of Technology), Richard Lindzen (MIT), Hendrik Tennekes (Royal Dutch Meteorological Institute), Nir Shaviv (Racah Institute of Physics), and Craig D. Idso (Center for the Study of Carbon Dioxide and Global Change). Furthermore, detailed studies contradict claims that industrial-era CO₂ has had a causal effect on climate and extreme-weather events.

Conclusion

Agitation against “pseudo-science” has two illegitimate interrelated societal mechanisms: Institutionally, it is propaganda (by word and by action) intended to legitimize and impose establishment science. Individually, it serves to preserve the identity-tied personal investment in belief of the teachings of establishment science.

For those of us who cling to the ideal of the university, a review of anti-“pseudo-science” agitation should lead us to support a strict meaning of academic freedom, which does not admit institutional suppression or containment of any chosen research direction and expression. We must trust that actual freedoms of research and expression lead to the best that society can be, through the discourse that arises, whatever that discourse will be.

Denis Rancourt is a former full professor at the University of Ottawa. He has published over 100 articles in leading scientific journals, principally in physics and environmental science. He is the author of the book Hierarchy and Free Expression in the Fight against Racism (Stairway Press, 2013), and a regular contributor to Dissident Voice.