

DEMOCRACY AND PANDEMIC



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Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venezia



Peter Paul Rubens: Faedon sets the earth on fire for his arrogance

Policy-making at the interface of science and values

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The «received view»: independence of science

Science in its current form has been developed, starting in the seventeenth century, together with other characteristics of **liberal societies**.



The motto of the English Royal Society, founded in 1660, still is “Nullius in verba”, “trust no one's word”.

It expresses the Royal Society members' desire to **oppose the rule of authority** by verifying all claims by resorting to facts, possibly determined by experiments.

Freedom and independence of science were values in the «received view», but now are threatened.

Based on the liberal background, **independence and neutrality of scientists** are a guarantee of sticking to “facts” and avoiding their mingling with opinions or ideology.

The reality today is quite different. The rise of populism and the spread of social media has led to an inter-mingling of facts, fake news and opinions. **Ideology often drives statements and decisions** that should be based instead on scientific evidence. But **scientists have largely stayed away from this.**

Health-economy conflicts and geopolitics: not new

In 6 weeks 8600 people died from cholera in Hamburg in 1892, since the authorities did not want to implement the quarantine, not to stop trades. Hamburg was ruled by a merchant class still with the characteristics of the Hanseatic League, and was not confident in the central power. They believed in local control and the situation became worse and worse until Koch was sent by the Emperor.



In general, tackling epidemics in the 19^o century was strongly intermingled with geopolitics. After the Suez canal was opened (1869), the **international commission for the control of cholera** ordered a quarantine to British ships. But the British claimed it was a violation of the Free Trade Act and that cholera was an excuse to block the British trades.

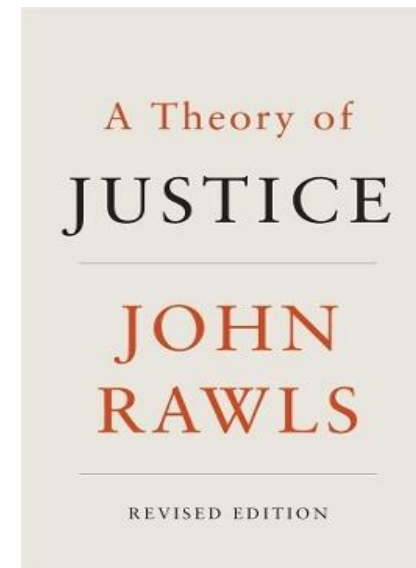
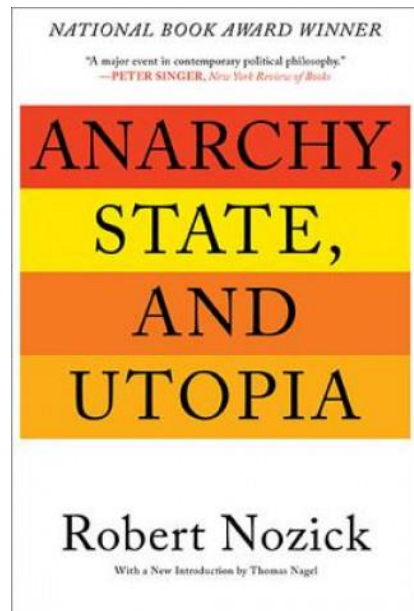
Today in China: General Chen Wei, the face of China's vaccine development operation, celebrated such achievements as “an embodiment of our country's S&T progress, an embodiment of China's great-power image and responsibility, and, even more, a contribution to humankind» (**soft power**)



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Some ideological roots of current policies in the United States and other States

A first set of roots is in ultraliberalism, aiming to minimize the role of the state. This is rooted for example in Robert Nozick's libertarian philosophy of «**minarchy**» (minimum state), as opposed to the traditional liberal progressive view of John Rawls («**maximin**» principle, i.e. to maximize the welfare of those at the minimum level of society).



According to the ultraliberal view, wealth and health are individual responsibilities. **The State is not in charge.** Some commentators have defined it a new «social darwinism» or soft eugenics: «Maga’s era of ‘soft eugenics’: let the weak get sick, help the clever breed»
Derek Beres, The Guardian 4 May 2025

A second set of roots is in «new age» ideology in Kennedy’s policies.
THE TIME IS NOW - Make America Healthy Again – MAHA

«We are a non-partisan (association) that is dedicated to advocacy and activism to help make America healthy again. We need to revisit our overall health strategies by focusing on **holistic health** and bringing the public information from a different perspective: the perspective of **natural healing.**»

Make America Healthy Again

The Make America Healthy Again ✓MAHA★ PAC stands as a revolutionary force in American politics. We are the MAHA PAC, we are leading the charge to transform America’s approach to public health, environmental sustainability, and government accountability.



For policy-making science is necessary but is insufficient. Policy-makers should use scientific evidence but also make their values explicit.

Some positive (value-laden) aspects of the pandemic (within the global disaster):

It has led to a rediscovery of the value of public healthcare and the state

It briefly prioritized health over the economy

It briefly led to a reduction in consumption and pollution

It contradicted the conservative motto according to which society does not exist, only individuals exist

All these values are now widely questioned in Western societies, six years on.

Lessons from humanities

COVID-19 and Plato's myth of the cave (philosophy teaches us humility)

Faced with the flurry of judgments and predictions (often wrong), Plato's myth of the cave comes to mind. It is as if the various observers were arranged at different depths inside a cave, at the entrance of which a fire casts shadows on the walls.

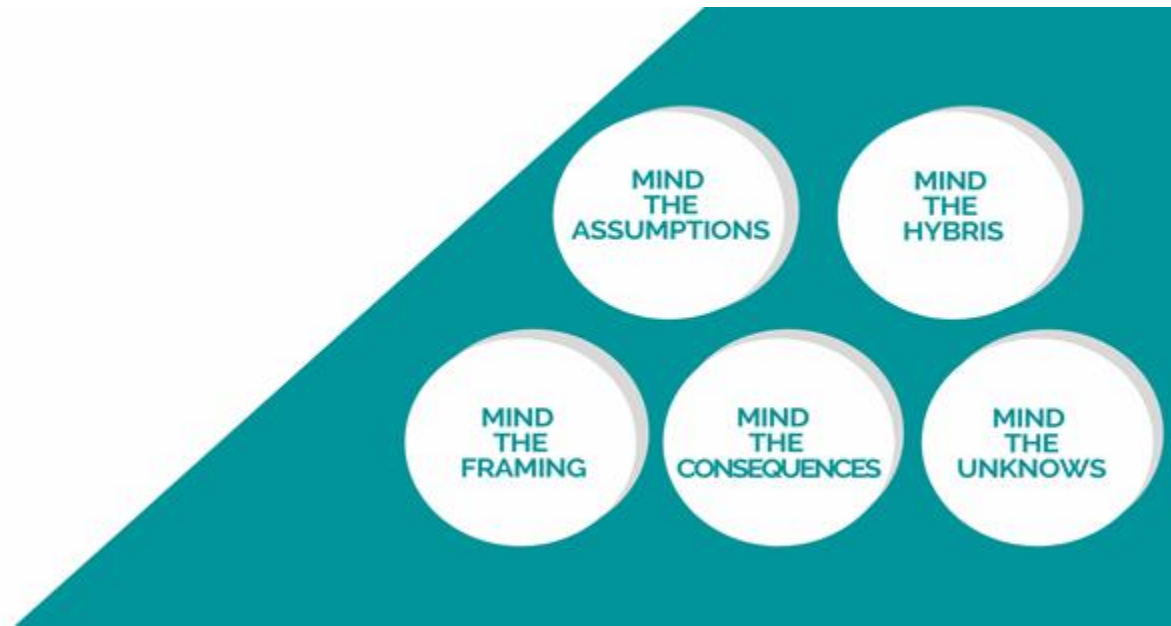
The prisoners in the cave of the myth develop theories about what is happening in the outside world based on their interpretation of the shadows of objects that passers-by carry outside the cave.



An example of humility and awareness - Five ways to ensure that models serve society: a manifesto

Andrea Saltelli (...), Paolo Vineis Nature 24 June 2020

Mathematical models produce uncertain numbers. Rather than using models to inform their understanding, political rivals often brandish them to support predetermined agendas. Modellers must not be permitted to project more certainty than their models deserve; and politicians must not be allowed to offload accountability to models of their choosing.





ACCADEMIA NAZIONALE DEI LINCEI

Preparedness to pandemics - Statement by Covid-19 Committee

The need for a **new alliance** between natural and social sciences (from planetary health to citizen empowerment):

(...)

Social and human sciences

Vulnerability and equity

Communication, hesitancy

Communication of preparedness

Ethics

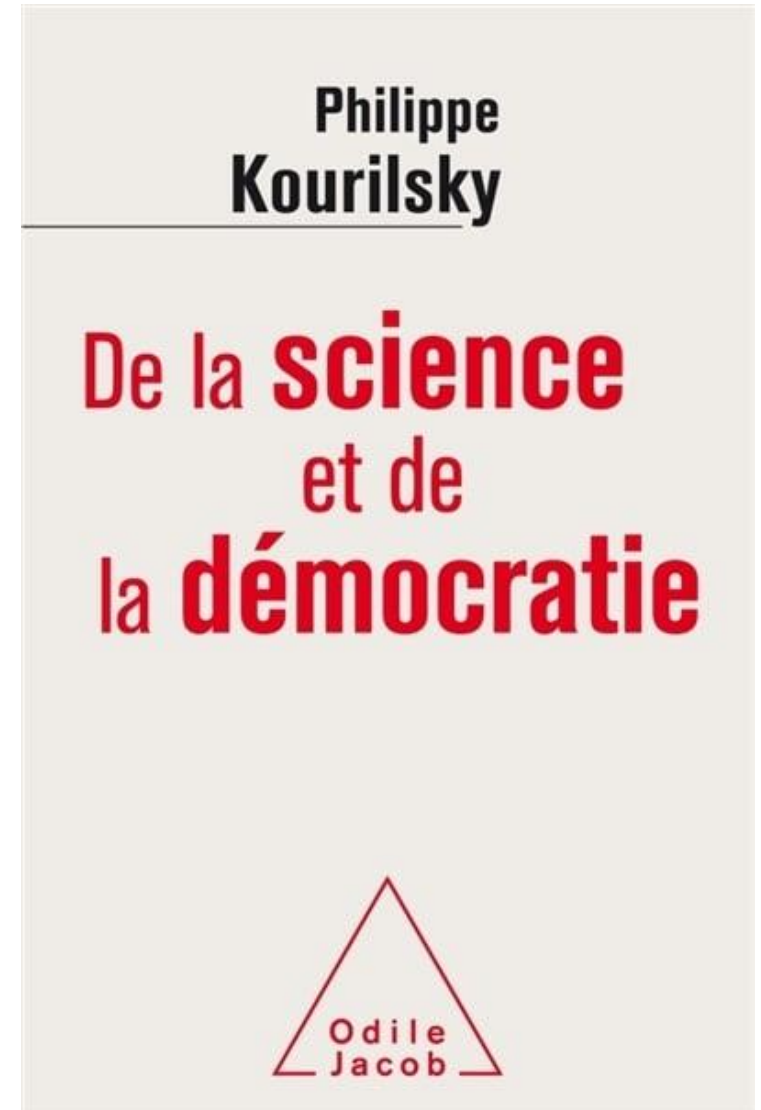
“What went wrong”

Complex socioeconomic tradeoffs

Biomedical sciences have something to teach to politics and social sciences as well

An original thinker who combines biology (by profession) and egalitarian ethics, **Philippe Kourilsky**, bases his analysis of democracy on the concept of “**robustness**,” which is akin to what we call allostatic load.

A regime is democratic, and therefore also tends to be egalitarian, if it is sufficiently robust against unforeseen events, internal and external - where robustness is a **property of complex systems**.





Un unjust society that does not respond adequately to stressors is a weak democracy



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

Deaths of Despair
and the Future
of Capitalism

Anne Case & Angus Deaton

"Of the highest importance."—Martin Wolf, *Financial Times*

Thank you

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