

Science Under Fire: Challenges to Scientific Authority in Modern America. By Andrew Jewett (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020). Pp. 369. Cloth, \$39.95.

After a volatile year marked by conflicts over COVID-19 restrictions, many Americans have blamed public skepticism about vaccines and scientific evidence about virus risk on social media misinformation, conflicting public health messages, and historically rooted racial discrimination.¹ Some observers, including prominent American journalists, have attributed growing mistrust of scientific expertise to the recent rise of political populism and its commensurate strain of anti-intellectualism.² Arguably, heightened cultural and political tribalism over the last few decades has only intensified polarization over controversial scientific issues like global warming, fracking, data mining, and genetic engineering. But skepticism about scientific authority has far deeper roots than contemporary narratives about technological displacement, scientific illiteracy, right wing anti-science sentiment, and a fractured “post truth” political culture would suggest. Andrew Jewett’s *Science Under Fire: Challenges to Scientific Authority in Modern America* canvasses the century-long tradition of skepticism toward scientific authority in American thought and culture. Drawing on a staggering range of primary and secondary sources, the book illustrates how widely disparate religious, ideological and cultural groups shared a common critical framework that viewed science’s growing cultural influence as the root of social and moral pathologies. Deeply researched and thoroughly documented, Jewett’s book paints a compelling picture of how opposition to science animated a wide range of cultural and political conflicts in the twentieth century.

Jewett’s book draws on the research of several recent historical works that investigate the postwar institutional and professional networks between scientists, government, and research institutions.³ Unlike these works that focus on the Cold War policy imperatives that shaped scientific research, Jewett’s book tracks the influence of science as a cultural category, mapping the multiple meanings of opposition to its cultural ascendancy after the 1920s. In *Science, Democracy, and the American University* (2012), Jewett challenged historical narratives about science’s rise as a value-neutral enterprise by demonstrating its early conception as a mobilizing force for strengthening American democracy.⁴ In the present volume, the myth of value-neutral science again takes center stage. This time, instead of representing post-World War II retrenchment from the “scientific democracy” of the 1920s and 1930s, it becomes a persistent target of cultural critics abhorred by its “reductive, mechanistic, and materialistic” conception of

¹ Zakiya Whatley, Titalayo Shodiya, “Why So Many Americans are Skeptical of a Coronavirus Vaccine” *Scientific American*, October 12, 2020: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/why-so-many-americans-are-skeptical-of-a-coronavirus-vaccine/> [accessed 03/26/2021]

² Suzanne Nuyen, “People are growing more skeptical of science, study finds” ABC News, March 21, 2020: <https://www.abc10.com/article/news/nation-world/people-are-growing-more-skeptical-of-science-study-finds/507-10a134fb-51dd-40d9-ad74-19e2f246e71e> [accessed 03/28/2021].

³ Audra J. Wolfe, *Freedom’s Laboratory: The Cold War Struggle for the Soul of Science* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2018); Jamie Cohen-Cole, *The Open Mind: Cold War Politics and the Sciences of Human Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Mark Solovey, *Shaky Foundations: The Politics-Patronage-Social Science Nexus in Cold War America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013); David Paul Haney, *The Americanization of Social Science: Intellectuals and Public Responsibility in the Postwar United States* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008); Ron Robin, *The Making of the Cold War Enemy: Culture and Politics in the Military-Intellectual Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁴ Andrew Jewett, *Science, Democracy, and the American University: From the Civil War to the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

human nature (4). Jewett chronicles the recurrent alarms over science's purported cultural intrusions across a dizzying array of (mostly non-scientist) critics. The book traverses many divergent and often opposing political and philosophical camps, ranging from religious leaders and humanities scholars to political conservatives and leftist radicals. Often ideologically at odds, their hostilities share a core conviction that science has imbued American culture with "faulty understandings of humanity" and threatened universal values and individual moral agency (16).

Jewett's narrative begins in the 1920s, before- in his account- Americans began to associate science with pernicious social and cultural consequences. By the middle of the decade, worries about the moral corrosion of mass consumerism and the widening influence of popular psychology provoked harsh reactions from Catholics, Humanist scholars, and even mainstream liberal Protestants. These critics railed against the "mental modernization" (24-45) of psychologists like Freud, Watson, and Dewey, whose naturalist and materialist views of human behavior encouraged an erosion of traditional virtues and moral reasoning. By the 1930s, an expanding welfare state, most notably Roosevelt's New Deal and its commensurate army of scientific technocrats such as the famed "Brain Trust" of reformers and social scientists who advised the president on social policy, invited fierce opposition from both free-market conservatives and progressive liberals. Though ideologically antagonistic, both groups feared the growing connection between science and the state would portend a collectivist slide into European-style totalitarianism hostile to individual freedoms.

Fears of "social engineering" by scientific state planners only accelerated after World War II. Although it is often assumed the unprecedented contributions of physicists to the development of atomic weaponry led to a "golden age" for science, the nuclear bomb instead "dramatically reduced the scientists' authority for some observers," and provided new avenues for moral criticism (104-105). Critics of the "bloated" federal bureaucracy associated Soviet communism with scientific secularism and atheism, and united an array of Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish attacks against the "spiritual disease" of scientism in modern culture and politics. Jewett spends the bulk of his analysis on the post-World War II period, navigating between the criticisms of humanists, social scientists, political conservatives, and New Left radicals. The latter chapters are the richest in the book. Jewett charts the unexpected convergence of intellectuals and cultural critics on the left and the right during the 1960s and 1970s against a technocratic managerial elite legitimized by a secularized liberal – and institutionally dominant – faith in "value-neutral" scientific progress. By the 1980s and 1990s, rising religious conservatism on the right and critical scholarship on the left further eroded scientific authority by opposing its universalist and dispassionate assumptions and drawing sharp distinctions between science and the religious and cultural pluralism they championed. New areas of research likewise garnered significant controversy, whether fears over bioscience and genetic engineering, political challenges to climate science and environmental policy, or debates in the academy over postcolonial and poststructuralist critiques of universalist scientific claims as hegemonic threats to cultural diversity and pluralism.

By employing science as a common interpretive lens through which to "highlight lines of connection, intersection, and influence between individuals, groups, and movements" (16), Jewett succeeds in illuminating a hidden thread among disparate thinkers united by a common distrust of science's cultural influence. Nevertheless, the thread he weaves of a pervasive anti-scientism becomes so diffuse it is often difficult to untangle from the other forms of cultural hostility it is paired with. As Jewett admits in his conclusion, many of the public controversies

he details are broad, sweeping polemics “forged... between clashing cultural elites over science’s extension into new domains,” abstractions that “have proven remarkably unhelpful in the controversies of our day” (259). Certainly, our present-day discourse appears to be just as unhelpful in resolving our most contentious public controversies over science. In his concluding chapter, Jewett recommends abandoning such generalizations, calling for a more charitable and nuanced understanding of science’s virtues and limitations, and taking seriously its contributions as an inherently human practice. Sound advice indeed given the scale and complexity of our present day political, environmental, and technological challenges. For providing an impressive historical account of scientific mistrust in America, this book is a welcoming, and timely, intervention.

Keith McNamara

University of Wisconsin-Madison