

GOVERNMENT BY SCIENTISTS: A REJECTION OF BEHAVIORAL SCIENTOCRACY

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In a recent essay, Nicolaus (1979) has developed an argument for systematic government based upon applied behavior analysis. His paradigm is founded upon Skinner's (1948) utopia, Walden Two, and envisions a government by behavioral scientists, a scientocracy.

In the scientocracy, government becomes the science of behavior design and management. This science depends upon information as the basis for decisions. Nicolaus repeatedly puts forth the notion that "it is within the competence of a scientific analysis to make clear the full range of consequences — immediate and ultimate — that follow from particular behavior." (p. 10) This position is slightly compromised when he suggests that "guesses" based upon prevailing facts and made by scientists be used as substitutes where information is lacking.

This slight contradiction in Nicolaus' argument is compounded by a major flaw in his proposed scientocracy. At the Walden Two community, citizens served limited terms as planners and were then returned to their chosen community work. In the behavioral scientocracy, however, "government is conducted, not by laymen unschooled in social planning and management, but by specialists in the science of governing." (p. 13) The formation of an elite class of governors is contrary to Skinner's vision of rotating citizen planners and might well lead to corrupt government.

This paper will argue against a behavioral scientocracy on two points. First, science is seldom able to identify all possible consequences and within the scientific community prevailing "facts" and "guesses" are often only reflections of currently popular paradigms. More important, however, is the second point. The proposed scientocracy establishes an elite governing class that, most likely, will make decisions based upon class self-interest rather than, as at Walden Two, on the basis of "the greatest good for the greatest number." The following sections will elaborate on these arguments.

Facts and Guesses

Nicolaus has created an image of inept and haphazard democracies bowing to logical and systematic sciences. Science is, however, seldom a systematic and rational accumulation of facts. It is, to the contrary, often an irrational process where certain theories gain prominence, facts are found to support the moment's most popular paradigm, and anomalies are ignored or attacked (*Kuhn, 1962*). Only through crises created by mounting divergencies and the availability of alternative paradigms is the scientific community willing to discard popular constructs.

The important point is that the "facts" accumulated by scientists are only "bits, pieces, or samples of information . . . some of it clear, some of it vague, some of it twisted . . ." (*Agnew & Pyke, 1969*). These facts are often observations guided by the theory of the day. As Mahoney (1976) has so well stated, "Today's facts are yesterday's science fiction and tomorrow's myths." So it goes that the world used to be flat and now it is round. The world used to be the center of the universe and now it is but one of many planets circling the sun. And the atom used to be the smallest particle known to man but now it is seen as being composed of many parts.

Needless to say, if facts are only reflections of current scientific thinking they differ only slightly from guesses. The question remains, *who* should make decisions for society if the basis of factual information can be questioned and if, as is often the case, one set of facts contradict another? Should questions of social design be decided by an elite class of scientist governors?

Corrupt Governors

The behavioral scientocracy leaves the power of decision to "specialists in the science of governing." The argument is made that these "specialists" will live in the society they design and, thus, make decisions that will benefit the survival of their society as well as themselves.

Is the proposed scientocracy different than today's society? Today's governors are aware of the threat to human survival posed by continued production of atomic weapons. They are aware of the threat imposed by unrestricted exploitation of the world's resources, and they are aware of the misery in which over half the world's people live. These governors live on this planet and yet they make decisions contrary to the wellbeing of the human race.

Why do governors engage in such behavior? The answer lies in an analysis of the governor's environment. Calvert (1979) has recently analyzed authoritarian trends in revolutionary movements and concluded that contingencies operating on those in the seat of power induce them to behave in their own self-interest. The revolution in Iran is a case in point as is President Carter's embracing of the corporate view.

But Nicolaus claims that scientists are different. Quite to the contrary. As Watson (1968) has so vividly conveyed, scientists are only human beings operating within their own culture. Witness the current debate over the safety of nuclear power plants. Scientists on the payrolls of Westinghouse and General Electric as well as those receiving large grants for university research present facts to support their views (and livelihoods) and reject arguments to the contrary. The scientists within the nuclear industry who speak out about safety concerns are punished through dismissal and public condemnation.

Scientists are no different than corporate executives, modern day politicians or, for that matter, revolutionaries. They all operate under the contingencies of their environment and when that environment changes so does their behavior.

Today's governors are members of an elite class which controls the great majority of contingencies in this society. They are, indeed, equivalent to the class of scientists who are to design society's behavior in Nicolaus' scientocracy. Today's governors are not called scientists. Rather, they are called corporate executives and politicians. The governors of today's society as well as those of the proposed scientocracy have and will learn to behave in ways most reinforcing to their particular class.

The corruption of this new governing elite is inevitable. It is unlikely that this new group of governors would behave differently than their predecessors given the same environment.

Towards Popular Control

Our world is not, today, governed on the basis of "the greatest good for the greatest number." Rather, it is governed by elite classes in their own self-interest.

What social structures will prevent the creation of an elite class of governors who make decisions contrary to the greater good of society? Calvert (1979) responds,

"Our answer is to look at the consequences, or technically, the contingencies of reinforcement. Traditionally, political life has involved a rather rigid division of labor between leaders and led, each subject to separate contingencies of reinforcement, which shape and maintain behaviors of dominance and passivity. So in order to prevent or minimize the possibility of corruption of leadership we might begin by consciously breaking down that division of labor which means bringing the masses into effective participation in political life, and secondly, as closely as possible, making leaders subject to the same contingencies as the led, in a word, no special behavioral payoffs for those fated to lead." (p. 26)

Calvert's aim is self-management by ordinary citizens of their government as well as their economic, educational, religious and family institutions. This decentralization of decision making power would, most likely, reduce the possibility that a small group of elites could continue to funnel society's resources towards their personal benefit.

Our role, as behavior analysts, is to identify current tendencies towards popular control in our society and work for their wider acceptance. In addition, we should begin to analyze the dimensions of self-managing institutions which seem to encourage and maintain popular participation and control.

Self-managing institutions currently exist in our society in the form of consumer cooperatives, union locals and, while often not recognized as such, local churches and synagogues that are member supported and controlled. The Israeli kibbutzim, Yugoslav factories and the Italian city of Bologna might also serve as models of future self-managing institutions.

As behavior analysts working for social change we need to study, propose and encourage successful institutions that are under popular control. We must also study attempts at self-management that have failed or become corrupt and identify those dimensions which led to failure and corruption.

Summary

Nicholaus' definitions of the functions of government are enlightening and to be commended. His proposed scientocracy, however, incorporates at least two incorrect assumptions about the natural environment. The most important mistake is assuming that scientists, by definition, will respond differently

than current politicians and corporate executives when confronted with the same contingencies, e.g. rewards for decisions based upon self-interest. This runs directly contrary to an operant view of behavior. The other assumption is that science is capable of making "clear the full range of consequences." Hopefully, this paper has cast doubt upon that assumption by showing facts and guesses to often be reflections of current scientific theories and in contradiction to each other.

It is important that proposed models of society include mechanisms to prevent the accumulation of power, i.e. the control of a majority of society's contingencies, by an elite group of governors. Only when decision making power is widely distributed among a majority of citizens will decisions be made that are based on "the greatest good for the greatest number."

Nicholaus has condemned democracy as "a polling of a general opinion" about the relations between behavior and its consequences. Such a definition is accurate but not a weakness. To the contrary, the strength of participatory democracy is this decision making process. The fact that it is often corrupted and unsystematic is a different issue, one which lends itself to behavioral analysis and planned change.

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