

The March of Unreason: Science, Democracy and the New Fundamentalism

by Dick Taverne

Oxford University Press, 2005

310pp, £18.99

ISBN 0-19-280485-5

A worrying trend in modern society is the rejection of reason in dealing with technical and social problems, and its displacement by instinctive responses. When people reject rational analysis, for whatever reason, democracy is threatened.

In this book, Lord Taverne confronts these forces of unreason and asserts the importance of an evidence-based approach to decision-making in a democracy. He ventures that NGOs in

collusion with the media promote unscientific and emotional responses to social problems. *The March of Unreason* is a provocative assessment of new uncertainties being created in modern society.

Several anti-intellectual developments in modern society are identified and analysed:

Choosing complementary medicines and quack treatments (homeopathy, aromatherapy, etc.) when huge advances in medical research have eradicated many life-threatening diseases and malignancies, and increased life expectancy;
rejection of genetic

modification of seeds despite centuries of slow progress to develop new varieties using hybridisation, and in the absence of convincing evidence that GM crops affect consumers or the environment;

support for 'organic' farming, with its low yields, high prices and increased health risks, seems to have become a 'fashion item' in wealthy Western countries;

'eco-fundamentalism' refers to environmentalists who refuse to be influenced by evidence or rational argument, and who regard science and technology as tools of big business and enemies of the environment; it approximates to a religion with trappings of uncritical belief, sacrifice and Armageddon.

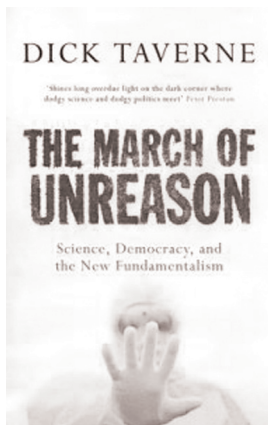
In a chapter on 'Reason and Democracy', the author assesses evidence of conflicts between science and religion, including the US confrontation between 'Darwinism' and 'creationism'. Political doctrines are also examined because, it is argued, authoritarian systems are not consistent with social and economic development. Eco-fundamentalists and alternative life-style groups reject rational thought and scientific method, which brings their interests into conflict with democracy.

Taverne makes a careful and objective assessment of these worrying and divisive views. He is perplexed why so many people reject the scientific method propagated by Newton and the liberal democracy fathered by Locke, which together

began the social and economic development of the past two centuries. (Strangely, Taverne ignores the writings of Hume and Adam Smith whose economic reasoning was as important.) He examines the basis of present pessimism and scepticism. Most people, he argues, have little understanding of science, and many associate it with magic or witchcraft. With social and political controversies surrounding recent scientific advances (genetics, nuclear physics, contraception, climate change, etc), this ignorance allows malicious groups to exploit hypothetical catastrophes to generate opposition to scientific research. (Post-modernists, mostly sociologists, add to this confusion by declaring there can be no 'objective' [value-free] science, because science cannot be independent of cultural and ideological content!)

Taverne becomes especially penetrating when he investigates the role of NGOs in modern society. Eco-fundamentalist organizations, such as Greenpeace, ActionAid and WWF, among others, are accused of exploiting popular fears by claiming that the environment is threatened by commercial agriculture, genetically modified plants, industrialisation and globalisation. Their principal target is multinational enterprises (MNEs), which are regarded as exploiting environment and labour. No mention is made of developing countries' need for private investment to generate economic development. In the EU, NGOs' lobbying has proved especially effective. It ensured the adoption of 'the precautionary principle', which is spreading to other international agencies.

Risk and uncertainty is a neglected area in Taverne's



assessment. Risk analysis is a mystery to most people and results in many wrong judgments. For example, the European Commission communication announcing the precautionary principle (February 2000) began, 'public opinion is becoming increasingly aware of potential risks to which the population or their environment are potentially exposed.' In fact, the public shows little understanding of risk. That is the problem. Food and drug testing has never been more exacting, while modern communication and identification technologies ensure rapid responses to any risk identified. Similarly, laboratory testing of products is better than ever before. Yet, we are told the European public perceives high risks and supports 'an approach to risk management that is applied in circumstances of scientific uncertainty, reflecting the need to take action in the face of potentially serious risks, without awaiting the results of scientific research.' This authorises governments to take action even without cause, which reverses the conventional scientific approach. Europeans have been terrified by BSE and 'foot and mouth' outbreaks and these fears are exploited by NGOs. The recent approval of REACH (Registration, Evaluation and Authorisation of Chemicals) will impose costs on the community as well as chemical companies. The precautionary principle and ignorance about risk play into the hands of eco-fundamentalists.

This book contains a thoughtful and valuable assessment of the dangers faced by a society that rejects a reasoned and evidence-based approach to democratic decision-making. It explains how

single-minded propagandists can exploit such societies. In many western countries, governments have chosen not to confront NGOs. This submissive posture has increased the influence of NGOs in the community, made the promotion of government policies more difficult and encouraged NGOs to adopt international agendas and operate freely across borders. They most resemble multinational enterprises—except the market disciplines MNEs! Taverne acknowledges all this. But he does not consider making NGOs answerable to democratically elected governments. In most countries, NGOs operate as registered charities, without requirements to report their income or their expenditure, or to pay taxes. These agencies are multi-million dollar enterprises, raising money in many ways, shifting funds around the world and exerting influence on national economies and international agencies. Many NGOs support 'corporate social responsibility' and monitoring of MNEs' behaviour. Yet NGOs are not subject to any regulations or transparency requirements. Why should NGOs not be made subject to public scrutiny by amending regulations applied to charities?

Taverne's book fills a yawning gap on the bookshelf. He mounts an effective and informed attack on the anti-globalisation coalition, identifying and revealing dangerous forces that could undermine democratic governments. He examines each source of unreason in turn and exposes NGOs' strategies to public scrutiny in ways they may not appreciate. Their apparently socially sensitive activities are exposed as subversive in ways that undermine the democratic system.

This calm and comprehensive analysis of the malign forces eating away at the democratic system is long overdue. What is needed now is a strategy to counter-attack anti-globalisation forces and to restore faith in democracy.

Reviewed by
David Robertson