

Social Epistemology as Oxymoron and Challenge
Al Rodbell, Encinitas, California

Academic journals are written for, and by, intellectual elites. Beyond the idealistic goal of expansion of enlightenment, journals are vehicles to navigate the road to prestige and the economic security of a tenured position. “Social epistemology” implies the interdependence between the masses who do not read such publications, *hoi polloi* of the Greek Forum, who then could be dismissed. That ancient democracy was a limited one where the very lowest classes were seen as essential in their subservience to those elite who created a viable government. We face rather more exceptional challenges to the governance of modern day America.

The academic idiom attempts to be precise and objective often doing so by ignoring the most common examples of a concept — something that leaves a general audience mystified. By being esoteric, and ostensibly value free, it actually opens the possibility of a broad general antipathy for those outside, those who do not accept the values of the intellectual community.

In contrast to arcane academic publications, the mass media has become overtly partisan with an increased level of invective that poses a threat to our country. Such was described by these closing words in a recent *60 Minutes* interview with the retired deputy director of the CIA Mike Morell who, for a third of a century, was aware of many potential dangers to this country:

What really keeps me up at night is the inability of our government to make decisions that will push our economy and our society forward. And one of the things I learned looking at the world is that a country’s national security, any country’s national security is more dependent on the strength of its economy and on the strength of its society than anything else ... there’s been a change from a willingness of the two parties to work together to get things done today, the two parties at each other’s throat and simply trying to score political points. (see [“The Deputy Director: Mike Morell”](#), *60 Minutes*)

Morell does not see our skirting with national default as political theater. This man, who knows politics having given daily briefings to the last three presidents, sees the danger beyond politics-as-sport; rather, our nation coming perilously close to losing an essential element of its continued success. If the worst does happen, historians will not blame any President, or any party, but look at the underlying stresses that could no longer be accommodated by the existing political system. Such is reflected in serious histories of the American Civil War that offer “And the war came” to define the war as a result of events going back far enough in time to transcend the actions at Fort Sumter, President Lincoln or the abolitionists. We are in such a time now, as those who attempt to transcend these forces are punished either by calumny from true believers on either side, or simply lack of relevance for not engaging in the emerging battle.

Secular universities have an obligation that transcends internal dynamics. They have evolved to reflect the inductive process of knowing where facts have priority over even the most profound idealized beliefs. This process creates a natural separation between science and the arts as the certainty of science is always limited in the spheres of larger societal values. This approach is contrasted with Christian universities that exist to maintain the faith of their students, the reality of the core biblical truth that may be subject to interpretation, but never to dismissal. Stephen Jay Gould's "[Nonoverlapping Magisteria](#)" (1997) was a prescription for detente between these domains of religion and science that did not fully anticipate the current government disfunction.

I write as a non-academic — one who was exposed and became dedicated to the ideals of a value free search for truth as only someone who did not have to find a place in a real world system could. The academic setting, the proverbial Ivy Tower, only exists because of the efforts of iconoclasts who were willing to be vilified for opposing the existing theological based world-view. The process of transformation into purveyors of a different orthodoxy can be redeemed only by using the tools and privileges of the institution to risk acknowledging and exploring this transformation.

Morell's explicit warning must not be ignored any more than the CIA's report in 2001, "[Bin Ladin Determined To Strike in US](#)", was simply not conceivable until it happened. Of course, after the event, the consequences were immense, orders of magnitude greater than had preventive measures been taken. Beyond the cost in lives and national wealth is unlimited funding for domestic and international intrusion on communications, that lends factual support for the most extreme accusations of government as oppressor of the people. If social epistemology has any function, it must explore the danger of nonoverlapping domains of knowledge becoming a framework for irresolvable internecine conflict. This academic discipline, as a part of the university system, has a unique advantage over other modalities of dissemination of information; its continued existence not being dependent on winning elections or gaining market share.

The next crisis created by the U.S. Congress, as there has been no change in the views of the two parties that led the country to the brink in October, one that could cause this country irremediable harm — is the activation of the debt limit in early 2014. It is virtually impossible to find articles in even the enlightened mass media that are not immediately construed as vilification of the opposition, whether this is actually in the content or not. We are close to a civil war, not one of bombs, battles and bloodshed, but total war nevertheless. War exists in the minds of people, as individuals and aggregates. War requires absolute hatred of the enemy, which immediately transforms any attempt at understanding their motivations as treason.

Social epistemology is both an oxymoron and a challenge. The "wisdom of crowds" does not negate its contagious irrationality when stoked by fear and hatred that, in our current era of instant directed private communication, may be even more toxic than when the media was at least public. The secular consensus that thrives in a university setting must be examined with the urgency of a need for a venue that transcends other modalities. Apotheosis of either democracy or free market must be tempered by its potential for

policy being defined by tactical interests rather than an overriding need to facilitate a workable coalition of the two sides of the political divide.

The greatest fear among those who cobbled together a new charter for this country in 1789 was not of outside enemies, but that of “faction” the word for political parties. They understood the fragility of the compact among independent states; that if such coalitions were formed the union would not survive. Those who signed on to the Constitution understood the challenges that would face future generations, but somehow were optimistic that they, like themselves, would value the benefits of unification more than their own interests. When political divisiveness is seen increasingly as an imminent national threat, the prestige of the secular academic enterprise must be brought to bear to the exigencies of the moment. When every avenue of communication is politicized, a channel that transcends this to reach a deeper, more meaningful, evaluation of complex issues is a national necessity. As neither our democratic political system, nor market-based media, shows evidence of being up to the task, let this be a challenge for social epistemology where to fail is less of an indictment than not to have tried.

Contact details: alvrdb-brt@yahoo.com