Cambridge 02138

Feeding the world, Alain Locke’s faith, divestment

ENDANGERED EXPERTISE

While this phenomenon has been growing for some time (e.g., the rise in creationism teaching), it is being accelerated by the Internet’s malign influence as a source of “alternative facts” to suit any preconceived point of view.

The Trump presidency is the latest (and perhaps the most dangerous) manifestation of this dynamic. Russia, and other hostile states, recognize this fact and continue to exploit this weakness in our national fabric. Nichols states “we’re in a very perilous place right now.” I certainly agree.

GARY USREY, M.P.A. ’85
Arlington, Va.

I have not read Tom Nichols’s Death of Expertise, but Lydialyle Gibson’s summary of it says nothing about how common practices and attitudes of experts or their educations might have helped lead to the backlash Nichols correctly decries. For decades now, it has seemed mandatory to focus as narrowly as possible in order to succeed as an expert. Failing to do so put one at an enormous competitive disadvantage. But narrowness led easily to arrogance, ethical blindness, and ignoring the wider context in which one’s certainties could be contradicted by aspects outside one’s ken.

Thus, experts in military strategy got Vietnam entirely wrong, did it again in Afghanistan and then Iraq, and so on. Nichols himself evidently suffered from the insensitivity of nuclear-war strategists to the effects on children’s psyches, among their other thoughtlessnesses. Economists quite commonly ignore the negative effects on some groups of policies that may narrow迄今为止它们的定义外，还可能会导致认知的错误。专家们显然也意识到了这一点，但并未因此采取行动。因此，政策制定者需要更加谨慎地对待专家的意见，因为我们所制定的政策可能会对社会产生深远的影响。
be beneficial overall. Management experts also ignore the human costs of their decisions—as when eliminating whole categories of jobs. Doctors who just look at the disease and not the whole patient or the family can make what amount to grievous mistakes. Ecologists, who one might hope would have wider horizons, still often don’t consider it their province to try to imagine how to mitigate negative effects on humans of even wise environmental policies. And on and on.

Unfortunately even Harvard has not seemed particularly able to widen horizons for typical undergraduate and graduate students in highly competitive fields of expertise, where the pressure for narrowness as part of success always dominates. A partial answer may be for Harvard and similar institutions to offer some students a “deeply broad” general education with the intent that they may somehow serve as public guardians against the flaws and oversights of experts. That is what—class- and gender-biased as it was—a “gentleman’s” education at Harvard once promised at its best. Reviving and modernizing such a path now would be going against entrenched power structures in which experts now dominate even at Harvard. They can be expected to fight against such a program as a waste of talent and resources. But the alternative, as Nichols—and Trump’s election victory—show, may be far worse.

Michael H. Goldhaber ’63, Ph.D.
Berkeley, Calif.

I agree with the issues and concerns that Tom Nichols outlines: “Ignorance and unreason in American Public Discourse”; Trump; opinions over facts; the future of our Republic; and so on.

Where I lose him is with the comment that “the failures of experts…are spectacular but rare.” Experts may have a good deal of knowledge about a certain subject, but they, like the rest of us, are also prone to a number of epistemic flaws, including confirmation bias; the tendency to view a changing world through old paradigms; and the ability to convince themselves that they know more than they really do. Experts, like the rest of us, are also self-interested, often reluctant to admit when they are mistaken, and eager to protect and expand their turf. These and other factors can lead to serious, unanticipated consequences.

Nichols does not acknowledge that our country has a number of significant problems with deep, bipartisan roots that preceded our turn against experts. For example, we have made a mess of our foreign policy; we cannot extricate ourselves from an endless stream of foreign wars; we continue to add to our debt at an unsustainable rate; our drug policy hasn’t worked, but it has contributed to scores of drug-related deaths and to the world’s highest incarceration rate...Presumably, many of the longstanding policies and practices that led to these outcomes were designed and implemented by experts. We cannot, of course, blame experts for all of our problems, but maybe it is both the reality and perception of expert malpractice that contributed to today’s unfortunate “mirage of knowledge.” Recognizing and acknowledging this might be the first step toward counteracting the turn against experts.

Howard Landis, M.B.A. ’78
Naples, Fla.

I howled laughing while I read “The Mirage of Knowledge”? Tom Nichols suggests that Trump and his supporters have rejected the “experts”...no kidding! Nichols further suggests this is a bad thing. But what have the “experts” given us in the last 30 years? Horrible trade agreements that hollowed out U.S. manufacturing, flat wages for American workers for over 15 years, two useless wars that cost trillions of dollars and thousands of American lives, the rise of communist China poised to surpass our GDP, $20 trillion of debt, government-run healthcare with skyrocketing premiums and poor service (see VA hospitals), the crash of 2008 brought on by cheap Fed money and the moral hazard of GSEs, and bullies in Washington who weaponized the IRS against patriots and forced the Little Sisters of the Poor to offer abortion coverage [Editor’s note: The issue was coverage for contraception.] against their religious convictions. Oh, and all the “experts” said Trump couldn’t win! In Trump, Americans
Editor's note: The article contained three errors: a misspelling of the name National Enquirer; a misstatement of the American dead in World War II as 470,000, instead of 417,000; and a mischaracterization of Nicholas’s childhood as a typical 1950s experience when the 1960s was intended. (Nicholas was born in 1960.)

GREEN REVOLUTION?
Jonathan Shaw’s article (“A New Green Revolution?” March-April, page 44) presents for-profit agricultural technology as a panacea for a hungry world, one about to face an “immense” shortfall in food as population increases. Reading it, one would never guess that we actually have plenty of food already. In fact, according to the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization, we currently produce enough to feed 10 billion people—the persistence of hunger is about geopolitics, poverty, and strife, none of which will be altered by modified seeds, and also about the dominance of monocultures, a legacy of the last “green revolution.” (There’s also the issue of meat consumption; Cornell recently estimated that we could feed 800 million people just on the grain that the U.S. currently devotes to livestock, a massively inefficient concentration of calories.)

This doesn't mean dismissing these innovations out of hand; designing seeds that can resist drought, for instance, is laudable and of obvious utility, but the history of the “green revolution” has often been one of unintended and devastating consequences, and that should urge us to be cautious with new agricultural technologies. The article presents not a single downside to this latest revolution, but we have already seen negative consequences to allowing for-profit companies to patent essential elements of the food supply. Instead of allowing fear to push us into blind acceptance of this newest wave of GMOs, we should carefully assess both the science and the social consequences associated with them, especially in contrast to tested solutions such as agroecology, while we also work to reduce meat consumption and food waste and to build the kind of world where we can distribute food more equitably. That last will need to happen in any case for us to feed 10 billion people, with or without Indigo Ag’s (and Monsanto’s) latest products.

Tara Kathleen Kelly ’91
Gloucester, Mass.

Editor’s note: For the record, Shaw wrote about some of these issues in “Eating for the Environment” (March-April 2017, page 11).

ALAIN LOCKE
On the occasion of Jeffrey Stewart’s new biography of Alain Locke, I truly appreciated Adam Kirsch’s “Art and Activism” (March-April, page 36) on that too long unheralded “quiet man” of the Harlem Renaissance. However, the article, like so many books about Locke, leaves out mention of the important fact that Locke was a Bahá’í. Just as his Harvard and his Rhodes experience at Oxford were germane to Locke’s intellectual evolution, the Bahá’í Faith was intrinsic to his spiritual development.

Locke embraced the Bahá’í Faith in 1918, the same year that he received his doctorate. The teachings of Bahá’u’lláh soon became the dominant spiritual influence in his life and on his thinking. Bahá’í became his core identity, eclipsing that of race or sexuality. Indeed, it was his active work for unity through diversity—on a worldwide scale—that caused the more partisan W.E.B. Du Bois to part activist ways with him. Locke saw racism as he saw so many narrow allegiances: as symptoms of a deeper spiritual disease. As he wrote in his 1943 essay “Lessons in World Crisis,” “[S]ome basic spiritual reorientation is a pre-requisite to the effective solution of many, if not most of the specific political, economic and cultural issues of our time.” That reminder is even more relevant for today’s “world crisis” than it was during World War II.

Tom Lysaght ’74
Los Angeles

May 1 bring to your attention that a previous biography of Locke appeared from University of Chicago Press: Alain L. Locke: The Biography of a Philosopher. It was written by Leonard Harris and me. The article in the March-April issue creates the impression that the new (please turn to page 86)
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Lovely, lively Boston-area retiree seeks her man! Mult-degreed, accomplished Harvard alumna; attractive and congenial. Are we similar? Please reply! saraleah1@outlook.com.

Fun-loving, 58 years young, Jewish reform widow. Florida resident, willing to relocate. Seeking gentleman, 60-72, for LTR/marriage. edabbelt1@gmail.com.

I once asked Riesman, a great supporter of the Peace Corps, what advice he might give to someone aspiring to be a school superintendent or a college president. “Spend time in a different culture,” he said. And he went to explain that a different culture might exist in the next street; you didn't have to go to a distant country.

Harvard undergraduates who exchanged with students at a community college might be surprised by the quality of the best teaching at some of those institutions; similarly, faculty and students at Harvard might be gobsmacked by the sheer intelligence of the best community college students.

Jonathan M. Daube, Ed.D. ’68
Northampton, Mass.

**LETTERS** (continued from page 7)

biography is the first full-length study of Locke's life.

CHARLES MOLESWORTH New York City

Editor's note: We know the book and have it in house. Adam Kirsch proposed his customary essay on Locke's ideas and writing, into which he worked this new, and in his view comprehensive, biography. Neither he nor we conceived of it as a book review per se, so much as an overview of Locke's life.

**SEARCHING INSIGHTS**

Reading John Rosenberg's suggestion (7 Ware Street, March-April, page 6) that Harvard institute an exchange program so undergraduates can spend a semester at a “fly-over-state” institution and counterparties come for a Crimson immersion, reminds me of the late Ford professor of social sciences David Riesman, author of The Lonely Crowd and unequaled commentator on higher education.

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Jonathan M. Daube, Ed.D. ’68
Northampton, Mass.

I HOPE THAT Harvard’s new leadership will reexamine policies related to its investments in fossil fuels. The old and tired argument that it is enough for the University and its institutional colleagues to “engage” with the industry grows less credible every year. Engaging for what? After so many years, can any results be measured?

The clock has run out on shareholder “engagement” and further talk about fossil fuel investments. At a minimum, it is now time to allow Harvard’s publics (constituencies) to be able to look at the University’s portfolios and investment strategies, and at the policies and decisions (apparently non-existent) that conform investment policies with all the other climate commitments of the University.

At a time when Harvard accurately boasts of major commitments to reduce the University’s climate footprint—e.g. research, teaching, greater building efficiency, broader community action and more—the University still stubbornly refuses to subject its investment portfolio to the same tests of modernity and climate relevance. Despite a growing and fruitful flow of promising ideas and models, the University’s governance boards seem terrified of conventional fossil-fuel wisdom—from what are these people hiding? What world do they think we are entering? President Faust even continues to offer the preposterous argument that Harvard remains so dependent on fossil-fuel use for its operations that it cannot begin to examine the climate impact of its sprawling investment portfolio.

Fortunately, many pathways to new thinking are opening up, and I hope that the new Harvard team challenges the thinking of the Harvard Investment Corporation, and shows a glimmer of the leadership that Harvard used to provide to the rest of the
ENDOWMENT TAXES

I note a few letters about the negative impact on Harvard of the tax on its endowment income in the new tax bill, but I strongly disagree with the idea that all is forgiven as long as the stock market, in part because of this bill, goes up. A writer’s statement that Harvard should thus welcome the new tax bill “by embracing the greatest innovation in the history of mankind, namely capitalism itself” (March-April, page 4), is misguided.

Such a one-dimensional notion could be countered with a similarly one-dimensional idea: that capitalism’s primary focus on making money may lead to the destruction of the planet as environmentally harmful but profitable enterprises see their stock prices soar. Capitalism isn’t the last word in economic theory, and the stock market isn’t the only relevant consideration when evaluating investments. I’d like to think of the future of mankind itself merits at least a little consideration in evaluating the impact of any tax bill.

HUGH R. WINIG ’65
Lafayette, Calif.

TAX REFORM, ROUND ONE
(continued from page 61)

Individual tax considerably more progressive to address current appetites for redistribution. Specifically, a large increase in the earned-income tax credit (EITC) for the lowest-income Americans could be financed by a new top bracket and a repeal of the step-up basis for inherited assets. The EITC provides good work incentives but is currently undersized and an expansion enjoys bipartisan support. Additionally, the population in the top bracket has grown to capture 1.0 percent of taxpayers; historically the top bracket captured 0.1 percent of taxpayers. The growth of the population in the top bracket is problematic, because very different taxpayers are being treated similarly and because such a populous top bracket makes raising the rate on the very wealthy difficult. Creating a new top bracket for taxpayers with income above $2 million, associated with a higher tax rate, on the other hand, could help finance an expansion of the EITC, as suggested above. And the step-up basis for inherited assets continues to benefit the wealthiest and provides incentives to hold on to assets too long—reasons this benefit for the most privileged Americans might productively be subjected to taxation. More ambitiously, the relatively broad support for carbon taxes remains an untapped opportunity.

What comes next? We should expect a significant response from other nations in the form of challenges and policy moves in reaction to the TCJA provisions that have tenuous underpinnings under international agreements and treaties. These legal challenges may be particularly problematic at a time when the U.S. government seems eager to turn its back on international treaties and norms. The consequential moves by the United States to slash the statutory corporate tax rate and try to enact a minimum world-wide tax rate will narrow the corridor of desirable tax rates for other countries to between 13 percent and 21 percent—a dynamic that could lessen the tax competition that was present under the previous regime, in which corporations sought ever-lower tax rates with their overseas income.

Domestically, the TCJA is most reminiscent of the 1981 tax cuts. That legislation was followed by a 1982 reform that reversed some of its effects, and additional annual reforms that further patched and improved the initial act. Ultimately, these more minor fixes prompted the transformational reform of 1986—a genuinely comprehensive simplification and rationalization of the tax code.

If the next five years follow suit, the TCJA will have accomplished much by beginning that process. Of course, skeptics will quickly point to the differing political dynamics between and within parties today relative to the 1980s—and to the resulting general inability to pass any meaningful legislation. But those same skeptics, including me, would have argued that the TCJA would never have passed in the first place. Given current fiscal realities, we should all hope that the TCJA represents the beginning of tax reform, rather the end.