

Separate State and Science

BY SHELDON RICHMAN



I don't reach much fiction these days, but one novel I intend to read is *State of Fear*, Michael Crichton's story of how environmentalists use allegedly man-made catastrophic global warming to control the population. Anyone who has the power to cause such hysteria among the Kyoto Protocol set must be doing something right. (Bjørn Lomborg is another.) I have Crichton's book in hand, but my schedule doesn't permit me to dive in quite yet. However, I was informed that at the back of the book there is an appendix with this grabber of a title: "Why Politicized Science Is Dangerous." This is a topic dear to my heart, so I read it.

Science, let us stipulate at the outset, has been of inestimable value to the human race. Because of science we live longer and healthier lives (to the dismay of the Social Security bureaucrats); we have devices that make life easier, more pleasant, and more fun: think of our reliable automobiles, small computers, PDAs, cell phones, portable DVD players, and iPods (the latest thing I can't live without); we have inexpensive ways to keep in touch with distant loved ones. All of us quickly take for granted revolutionary inventions that would have astounded our grandparents and in some cases even our parents.

But science, like anything else, can be twisted into something inimical to human welfare. I see two threats. One comes from scientism. This is the use of the procedures of the physical sciences in the study of human action, especially economics. When human beings are looked on as objects rather than persons, trouble brews. Properly conceived, science gives us life-serving control over our physical environment. Improperly conceived, it emboldens social engineers to control *us*. Beware those who view the economy as a machine. Statistical aggregates and simultaneous equations conceal flesh-and-

blood individuals with preferences, values, and aspirations. Social engineering would meet with more skepticism if this were kept in mind.

The other threat is the subject of Crichton's appendix: the politicization of science, or the union of scientific research and state. By now, of course, government has tainted much of science, especially medicine and climatology. There is no neutral government funding of research. Every benefit is a tether. Each grant creates a desire for future grants, which means the findings had better not offend the grant-making agency, which always has an agenda.

Crichton, who has anthropology and medical degrees from Harvard, begins his brief essay by looking back at two notorious cases of politicized science: eugenics and Lysenkoism. In both cases a preconceived "public policy" objective drove and therefore corrupted the "science." What occurred had the appearance of science (unless one looked carefully), but in fact bore no relation to actual scientific activity. Essential terms weren't even defined, so most of what was said was meaningless, except for its power to further the objective.

As Crichton points out, in the early twentieth century eugenics was presented as a scientific answer to a purported crisis—the enfeebling of the human race: "The best human beings were not breeding as rapidly as the inferior ones—the foreigners, immigrants, Jews, degenerates, the unfit, and the 'feeble minded.'" What was the answer? In the United States, it was compulsory sterilization; in Germany, it included extermination by gas. Yet eugenics was the vogue among "progressives." Prestigious foundations—Carnegie, Rockefeller—poured money into it. Prominent figures were eager to associate

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themselves with the movement, including Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Winston Churchill, Alexander Graham Bell, Luther Burbank, Leland Stanford, H. G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, and Margaret Sanger (founder of what became known as Planned Parenthood). The first president of the American Eugenics Society was the well-known Yale University economist Irving Fisher. As Crichton notes, after the Nazis gave eugenics a bad name, biographers neglected to mention their subjects' former enthusiasm for the cause.

Regarding the scientific status of eugenics, Crichton writes, "But in retrospect, three points stand out. First . . . there was no scientific basis for eugenics. In fact, nobody at the time knew what a gene really was. The movement was able to proceed because it employed vague terms never rigorously defined. . . . Second, the eugenics movement was really a social program masquerading as a scientific one. What drove it was concern about immigration and racism and undesirable people moving into one's neighborhood or country. . . . Third, and most distressing, the scientific establishment in both the United States and Germany did not mount any sustained protest. Quite the contrary. In Germany scientists quickly fell into line with the program."

In the second case, the Russian peasant T. D. Lysenko's claim that he had discovered how to make crops grow better by treating seeds and thereby altering offspring seeds had no scientific foundation whatsoever, but it fit with the anti-genetic prejudices of Josef Stalin. "Lysenko was portrayed as a genius, and he milked his celebrity for all it was worth," Crichton writes. He eventually joined the Supreme Soviet. "By then, Lysenko and his theories dominated Russian biology. The result was famines that killed millions, and purges that sent hundreds of dissenting Soviet scientists to the gulags or the firing squads."

Politicized science ruins and destroys lives.

The Banning of DDT

In a speech to the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco in 2003, Crichton provided another lesson in the lethality of politicized science: the ban of the insecticide DDT. In the early 1960s Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* set off a movement to rid the world of the insecticide. As a result, the long and promising effort to

defeat the scourge of mosquito-carried malaria in the developing world was reversed and the deadly disease made a tragic comeback.

In his brief discussion of this episode, Crichton pulled no punches:

I can tell you that DDT is not a carcinogen and did not cause birds to die and should never have been banned. I can tell you that the people who banned it knew that it wasn't carcinogenic and banned it anyway. I can tell you that the DDT ban has caused the deaths of tens of millions of poor people, mostly children, whose deaths are directly attributable to a callous, technologically advanced western society that promoted the new cause of environmentalism by pushing a fantasy about a pesticide, and thus irrevocably harmed the third world. Banning DDT is one of the most disgraceful episodes in the twentieth century history of America. We knew better, and we did it anyway, and we let people around the world die and didn't give a damn.

Crichton's speech covers much more than this, and I commend it highly. (It is online at the PERC website, www.perc.org/publications/articles/Crichtonspeech.php.)

In the *State of Fear* appendix, Crichton emphasizes that he is not claiming that the global-warming scare is exactly like the fear-mongering about the supposed threat to the human gene pool. "But the similarities are not superficial," he writes. "And I do claim that open and frank discussion of the data, and of the issues, is being suppressed. Leading scientific journals have taken strong editorial positions on the side of global warming, which, I argue, they have no business doing. Under the circumstances, any scientist who has doubts understands clearly that they will be wise to mute their expression."

That kind of atmosphere is the death knell of genuine science and the benefits it is capable of producing. The lives and liberty of everyone are in jeopardy. "[T]he intermixing of science and politics is a bad combination, with a bad history," Crichton concludes. "We must remember the history, and be certain that what we present to the world as knowledge is disinterested and honest."

