

Dislocacions

Ferran Sáez Mateu

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In his previous book, *The Twilight of Democracy* (*El crepuscle de la democràcia*, Edicions 62, Barcelona, 1999), Ferran Sáez Mateu discussed how traditional means of parliamentary representation have been gradually emptied of content in favour of pressure group campaigns and media-induced public outrage. One symptom (or maybe a consequence) of that shift is the abandonment of the role of science as an arbiter in collective decision making. “Official” science is facing tough competition from “alternative” science, and the latter has built a logic-proof shield that renders it immune to peer scrutiny.

Following on from there, *Dislocacions* starts with the acknowledgement that there is a place for emotion and the irrational in policy making, be it a belief in a set of laws or in a preferred model of society. In this respect, the Enlightenment carried a sting in the tail: turning Goddess Reason against reason itself leads to a postmodernist dead end.

The problem is, what is the place for irrationalism in a modern society? The example of “dislocation” with which the book starts is not new, but it is valid nevertheless. Art is a traditional showcase of emotion: anyone with a sensitive soul will, at a certain point, write poetry, compose string quartets or paint a neighbouring cereal field. But art has become rationalistic to the extreme that it needs an extra layer of interpretation to explain its meaning. Simultaneously, science (at least, the kind of science preferred by the public if one considers the rise of alternative medicine practices) has become emotive and based on unfalsifiable mystic ideas.

Sáez introduces two interesting concepts into the debate. One is that of “epistemological politeness”: we have got used to believing that all opinions are equally respectable, therefore all opinions are equally valid. This mixing of ethics (“respect”) and epistemology (“validity”) is easily seen in the fact that peer-reviewed reports never make a bigger impact on the public than “alternative” reports. It is a direct consequence of a postmodernist approach to science.

The second concept that can be useful to the debate is the “Expertocratic State”. Political decisions are based on expert reports, usually in the form of digests or conclusions.

Epistemological politeness makes them all equally valid, and the role of the state is to mix them with public opinion to produce a particular policy. "Public opinion" is a most malleable material made of expert reports, so the circle is closed irrespectively of any internal inconsistencies. Democracy becomes demoscropy when public opinion rules over citizenship.

In a society where the information available is overwhelming and decision-making is based on reports of unequal epistemological validity, the first reaction that comes to mind is to limit the production and dissemination of false or misleading data. But this is contrary to the principle of freedom underlying democracy as we know it.

Sáez proposes a way to allow freedom and at the same time protect the normal functioning of democracy: responsibility. Anyone is entitled to their opinion on whatever subject, but if one chooses to participate in public affairs and influence the making of decisions, one must also be held accountable for the consequences. A look at any old newspaper will show how some people declined to keep their own counsel in subjects such as AIDS or BSE. Those of them that are legally accountable can face suing, destitution or public humiliation. Others, being self-appointed, can quietly tiptoe away and rely on the short-term memory of their contemporaries.

Of course, Sáez is not neutral. He is firmly based on a rationalistic ground and a reluctance to abandon the principles of the Enlightenment. He is one of the cryptic new brand of progressives that can be easily mistaken for conservative traditionalists in an age when progressive credentials are given mostly by NGOs.

Dislocacions is an enlightening book, thought-provoking and a very much welcome addition to the debate about the role that science must play in a modern society. It is aimed at a general readership, but some readers will find it particularly pertinent. Scientists, policy makers and members of pressure groups (including the media, industry and environmentalists) will see themselves here under a different light. The arguments are sound and based on traceable references, but this is not a hardcore apology of scientific reductionism applied to politics. Rather, it is a cry to make a better use of rational science and enjoy irrationality in other contexts such as Bach's cello sonatas.

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