

**MESSENGER LECTURES**  
*Fall 2008*

## **After Enlightenment: Rethinking Science's Place in Democracy**

**Sheila Jasanoff**  
**Harvard University**  
**John F. Kennedy School of Government**

September 3, 4, and 5, 2008  
Goldwin Smith Hall, Kaufmann Auditorium  
4:30 to 6:00 p.m.

Among the shocks and surprises of the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one of the least expected is a growing anxiety in many parts of the world about the relations among science, society, and the state. Evidence that something is broken comes from many quarters, troubling scientists, citizens, and decisionmakers alike. US commentators, for example, bemoan the persistence of scientific illiteracy, the rise of superstition and religious fundamentalism, the rejection of sound science by politicians and publics, and even, at the extreme, the waning of the Enlightenment. Often-cited evidence includes the unending controversy over teaching evolution in public schools, as well as popular rejection of scientific authority on such matters as vaccination, diet and nutrition, alternative medical therapies, genetically modified crops, stem cell research, and climate change. Unsettling, too, is the spectacle of American decisionmakers ignoring expert advice to pursue questionable policy objectives, decreeing by their actions that power need not accept the restraints of science and reason.

What makes these cases and concerns all the more notable is that they have arisen in America and Europe, in some of the world's most technologically advanced and politically mature democracies. The assumption that increasing scientific knowledge leads to better government no longer seems self-evident. The tacit codes that held science and society together in relative harmony for two centuries have come at least partly unstuck. The social contract with science seems urgently to need rewriting in the light of new knowledge concerning science, power, and politics. Instead of assuming unproblematically that science speaks truth to power, we need to think more deeply about the conditions under which the growth of scientific knowledge best advances the public interest. This is where the field of science and technology studies (S&TS), which has established such strong roots at Cornell, can make a difference. Exploring how to move beyond today's tensions and contradictions in the politics of science and technology is the main purpose of these Messenger lectures. In the process, I also hope to lay out a broad vision for the future of S&TS as an emerging social science field.

## **Lecture 1: The Wisdom of Strangers**

(Wednesday, Sept. 3)

The first lecture addresses the rising influence of experts in public life and the implications of this phenomenon for democracy. Long recognized as an adjunct of modernity, and studied almost as long by sociologists as a form of professional practice, expertise has figured less centrally as a topic of political and legal analysis. Discussions of legitimacy, whether in politics, law or international relations, seldom include serious thinking about the nature, limits, and functions of expertise. When expertise is considered at all, it is more often viewed as an impediment to democracy than an essential component of it. This lecture will use insights from science and technology studies to examine the role of expert judgment in contemporary politics and policy. I will look at the means by which we recognize experts and accredit them as holders of privileged knowledge or skills—and at the troubles that arise from putting our trust in the wisdom of strangers.

## **Lecture 2: Law's Knowledge**

(Thursday, Sept. 4)

The second lecture concerns the law as an instrument for validating scientific knowledge and using science to further justice. Law is perhaps the most powerful institution through which knowledge becomes public and underwrites collective action, especially in the United States. Legal institutions not only create demands and incentives for knowledge production, but also processes for filtering, assessing, and certifying scientific evidence. This lecture looks at the ways in which the law at once constructs and externalizes the technical knowledges that it relies on for rendering justice. Law, I will argue, needs the image of an autonomous science to sustain its authority, but it is complicit in creating the very autonomy that it then takes as externally given. I will consider the implications of this paradoxical aspect of law's knowledge for the delivery of justice.

## **Lecture 3: Getting the Right World**

(Friday, Sept. 5)

The third lecture considers the challenges to both scientific and political authority arising from globalization. The institutional connections between public knowledge and political power have slipped out of the exclusive control of nation states in recent decades. In many policy domains—for instance, climate change, animal-borne diseases, genetically modified crops, cybercrime, biodiversity loss, and chemical pollution—neither the causes nor the consequences of social problems are any longer contained within the borders of single states. Nor is it possible to legitimate the knowledge required to address such problems purely on the basis of domestically generated science or in accordance with national policies and administrative processes. Drawing particularly on debates around biotechnology, climate change, and nuclear power, I will address in this lecture the topic of reliable science for global decisionmaking, and ask how we can get the right world while also getting the world right.

**All three lectures will be held in Kaufmann Auditorium, 4:30 to 6:00 p.m.**

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