The geography of the US’s mishandling of COVID-19: A commentary on the politics of science in democracies

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During the pandemic, many prominent global leaders and scholars have called for placing science above politics. This commentary argues that such rhetoric dangerously oversimplifies science and politics as insular from democracy and geographical context. The theory of co-construction from science and technology studies reveals the pandemic’s geographic intersection with other threats to democracy, such as rising inequality and authoritarianism. Since COVID-19 figures to be central to the politics of the future, the field of geography helps to contextualise the importance of problematic trends that hinder the capacity for democracies to respond to present and future crises.

KEYWORDS
authoritarianism, co-constitution, COVID-19, democracy, geography, science and technology studies

1 | THE RHETORIC OF “SCIENCE OVER POLITICS”

As countries around the world struggle to curtail the impact of COVID-19, many prominent leaders and scholars are emphasising the importance of placing science over politics. The Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), Tedros Adhanom, implored world leaders in April 2020, “Please don’t politicize this virus” (Chappell, 2020). Historian John Barry cautioned in a July 2020 New York Times opinion article, “When you mix science and politics, you get politics” and that “we have to return to science” (Barry, 2020). This explanation of the imperative of putting science over politics to control COVID-19 is becoming an increasingly common framework for explaining the pandemic, but this portrayal of science as separate from politics is a problematic notion with deep historical roots. For example, in an 1809 letter, then US President Thomas Jefferson writes, “These (scientific) societies are always in peace; however their nations may be at war. Like the republic of letters, they form a great fraternity spreading over the whole earth, and their correspondence is never interrupted by any civilized nation” (Rebok, 2006, p. 126). Jefferson’s use of “civilized nation” hints at Jefferson’s circumscribed conception of humanity that legitimised the genocide of Native peoples, and so even though the scientists of Jefferson’s era enabled tremendous scientific advances, these benefits accrued mostly to white people, Europeans, and settlers. Without considering the politics of science and the co-constitution of science and society, calls for upholding science hazard being ahistorical, apolitical, and at their core authoritarian.

In the US, three troubling trends exacerbated the failure of government responses to COVID-19: the ongoing rise in inequality (Dorling, 2014), kleptocracy (Kendzior, 2020; Snyder, 2018), and networked technologies that impede democratic participation (Bridle, 2018). The field of geography is well equipped to examine how these trends intersect with a coronavirus that introduces a unique public health threat. Infectious microbes like the novel coronavirus are independent actors that introduce new borders and territorialisation of space (du Plessis, 2017). COVID-19 reveals the stark benefits of living in a state with political governance that fosters the competent implementation of scientific knowledge and techniques. In the US, the Republican Party since the Reagan administration cultivated unfettered capitalism and white nationalism as a central but problematic part of its party platform (Alexander, 2010; Dorling, 2014). Trump’s presidency makes these
problems many times worse and his administration’s mishandling of COVID-19 demonstrates that the root problems are not scientific but political.

Scholars from the interdisciplinary field of science and technology studies have long recognised that science is not above the fray of politics. They draw our attention to the co-production of scientific knowledge and social order (Jasanoff, 2004). Any discussion of the relationship between science and politics must grapple with fundamental questions of democracy, of how those governed accept, challenge, and reshape the imposition of scientific expertise (Brown, 2009; Hilgartner et al., 2015; Jasanoff, 2017). Since this commentary draws on theories from science and technology studies that emphasise the role of democracy, I mainly discuss the US and other democratic countries while refraining from analysing countries with other types of governance such as China.

Popular portrayals of science oversimplify it as society’s saviour, an unadulterated boon. Instead, we need to recognise science as a set of knowledge, techniques, and technologies developed, debated, and implemented by credentialed experts. Calls for restrictions on reproduction based on phrenology and eugenics would be echoed over and over again by scholars, researchers, and laypersons who were convinced that their own scientific investigations had empirically illustrated the genetic component of a variety of social behaviors or mental characteristics” (Hasian, 1996, p. 18). This example, drawn from the history of science, underscores the danger of any conception of science that invokes its authority solely from empirical objectivity and disregards socially embedded notions of justice.

Two points about the relationship between science and society warrant further elaboration. First, individual advances in scientific knowledge must have access to political power if they are to influence policies and remediate public health threats. For example, during an 1850s cholera outbreak in London, scientist John Snow opposed the then dominant miasma theory that diseases spread through foul-smelling air (Lilienfeld, 2000; Shah, 2016). Snow countered that cholera spread through contaminated water and orchestrated the removal of the Broad Street pump, a removal that garnered legendary status in the fields of epidemiology and medical geography. The actual story is a bit more complex, because Snow had ties to royalty and industries that sought to lift restrictions on air pollution that were kept in place by miasma theory (Lilienfeld, 2000). Snow’s research on cholera had little influence at the time and the Broad Street pump intervention only achieved legendary status between 1930 and 1950 (Vandenbroucke et al., 1991). Still, the story of John Snow and the Broad Street pump reinforces that science requires access to the levers of political power if it is to benefit society.

Second, societal priorities and incentives shape the direction and implementation of scientific advances in public health. Capitalist approaches to biomedicine are shaped by the influence of multinational corporations and prioritise the goal of generating profits over other objectives such as public health benefits (Angell, 2005; Rajan, 2017). Scientists face disincentives for curative therapies as opposed to mitigator treatments, because cures undermine the potential for future revenue growth (Roy, 2020). For example, Gilead introduced a drug that cures hepatitis C in 2013, but after a brief surge Gilead’s market value halved, which led financial analysts to denounce the hepatitis C cure as a cautionary tale of an unsustainable business model (Roy, 2020, p. 113). Some interdisciplinary researchers and international organisations point out that healthy publics require more than biomedical interventions, because despite tremendous medical advances many public health problems require engaging more deeply with a range of cultural and environmental factors (Hinchcliffe et al., 2018).

The rest of this commentary takes up situated intersections of COVID-19, science, and society with an emphasis on the US. Before delving into this topic, it is worth noting that a number of prominent scientists, especially US-based experts like Anthony Fauci, invoke the rhetoric of “science over politics” to emphasise their objectivity and bipartisanship. In so doing they aim to influence the Trump administration to adopt policies that produce better public health outcomes. Such scientific experts are in an excruciating position, and while I recognise their plight, that does not mean that social scientists should uncritically accept such problematic rhetoric. Two points should suffice to reveal the insights gained from interrogating this rhetoric. First, the argument that an expert like Fauci should be listened to because of their scientific expertise and objectivity is not a scientific argument. It is fundamentally a political argument about who should have the power to set policy. Second, officials in the Trump administration face a set of pressures similar to collaborators in France’s Vichy government (Rich, 2020). The fault lies not with scientists who strive to navigate an untenable position but with the politics of a Republican party that enabled Trump’s election and failed to remove him from office despite his dearth of fitness.

This commentary adds a deeper layer of analysis to the “science over politics” rhetoric that predominates much of the public discourse on COVID-19 responses. The coronavirus will most likely continue to circulate at lower numbers even after the pandemic ends “because enough people have been either infected or vaccinated” (Zhang, 2020). Until then, COVID-19 is the defining political issue, and suggesting that science is the answer obscures the imperative for investigating how the politics of a powerful liberal democracy like the US became so dysfunctional that an aspiring authoritarian would be empowered to disrupt a competent pandemic response and in the process sow death and suffering. Since the narrative of
the COVID-19 response will shape future trajectories, an emphasis on empowering scientists that overlooks underlying political problems will fail to strengthen the political capacity for societies to respond to future crises. A more vigorous politics requires struggling against the corrosive trends that undermine equality and democracy.

2 | FAILURES OF THE US COVID-19 RESPONSE

The US stands out as a country that botched the COVID-19 response despite being the world’s wealthiest country and having many leading scientific institutions (Yong, 2020). Here, I focus on two instances that highlight the insufficiency of the science over politics framing to explain the Trump administration’s response. The first instance was the Trump administration’s mid-April 2020 reassignment of Dr Rick Bright, the scientist in charge of developing a vaccine for the coronavirus. Bright was reassigned because he refused to implement widespread tests on Trump’s preferred therapeutic drugs of chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine. In a whistleblower complaint, Bright writes, “I am speaking out because to combat this deadly virus, science – not politics or cronyism – has to lead the way” (Shear & Haberman, 2020). This complaint echoes the science over politics position but also warns against corruption in the form of cronyism. Trump’s presidency marks a culmination of sorts for the rise of a kleptocratic class that includes authoritarian political leaders like Russia’s Vladimir Putin (Kendzior, 2020; Snyder, 2018). Rising authoritarianism undermines the norms and protocols that ensure the competent implementation of scientific knowledge to benefit society. For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has a much-venerated manual for communicating with the public during an outbreak (Tumpey et al., 2018). Trump regularly shreds this manual’s recommendations by delivering public health messaging himself, attacking public health experts, and changing his guidance to the public (Johnson & Wan, 2020). This mishandling of the US response and the argument that Trump should leave the messaging to scientists are again at their core political arguments.

The second instance is the contrast between the Trump administration’s federal intervention to target Black Lives Matter protesters but uncoordinated management of state-level COVID-19 responses. These moves should be linked together as part of a broader understanding of the authoritarian response by the Trump administration, a response that weaponises inequality and white nationalism. COVID-19’s spread in the US continues to unequally afflict Black, Latinx, and Native American communities with higher infection and mortality rates (Hedgpeth et al., 2020; Scott, 2020). The murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police sparked widespread Black Lives Matter protests against police violence that mobilise around notions of equality, that people should have equal rights and feel equally safe when going on a jog or encountering police officers. The Trump administration deployed federal troops to target protests against inequality in Portland and other cities even as the Trump administration continues to deflect responsibility for managing the COVID outbreak that deepens inequality along familiar ethnic and economic lines (Reich, 2020).

The Republican party subverts widespread understandings of democracy to mean a notion of freedom tied to market triumphalism, an idea of democracy that ignores the importance of equality (Taylor, 2019). Western intellectuals drew from an idealisation of American Indian culture to develop the centrality of equality to democracy, and it provides a necessary check on power inequalities that result from freedom (ibid., Ch. 1). Through policies such as residential segregation and mass incarceration, the US systematically produce inequality that benefits white people and disadvantages Black people and other persons of colour (Alexander, 2010; Rothstein, 2017). The Republican Party has long obstructed sensible gun regulations at the expense of public health (Gabor, 2016). These legacies of the Republican Party inflamed by Trump shaped the anti-lockdown conservative protests against social distancing (Fritze et al., 2020). Another factor that both enabled the election of Trump and exacerbates disinformation is the role of networked technologies (Bridle, 2018). Not only do these technologies interfere with democratic governance, but they also contribute to new forms of capitalism that threaten to undermine longstanding social and economic relations (Zuboff, 2019).

3 | THE POLITICS OF THE PRESENT AND FUTURE CRISSES

As scientific knowledge of COVID-19 accumulates, a consensus is emerging that certain strategies for responding to the disease are more effective than others. For example, it has become clear that COVID-19 typically spreads through direct transmission between infected people and instances of fomite transmission are exceptionally rare (Thompson, 2020). As a result, both WHO and the CDC updated their positions on mask-wearing to acknowledge the effectiveness of masks in stemming COVID-19 transmission (CDC, 2020; WHO, 2020). Taiwan is excluded from directly participating in WHO, and this is actually attributed with contributing to Taiwan’s success in effectively curtailing COVID-19’s spread (Rowen, 2020). Democratic countries rely on the science of public health experts to guide their policy, but these experts are not always as prescient as Taiwan’s. The Trump administration repeatedly cited favourable modelling by IHME-based scientists who
estimated in April that the US would have only 60,400 deaths by August (Wan & Johnson, 2020); by the start of August, the US already topped 150,000 confirmed casualties from COVID-19. Scientists make mistakes and revise their positions as new findings emerge. Even with initial missteps, many countries have the capacity to curtail COVID-19’s spread if political leaders prioritise this outcome.

The political implications of COVID-19 responses going forward are massive. Leaders such as New Zealand’s Jacinda Williams and South Korea’s Moon Jae-in reached record approval levels in May because voters perceived them as marshalling effective COVID-19 responses. More concerning, COVID-19 has hastened the rise of authoritarianism. For example, the coronavirus provided Viktor Orbán with the opportunity to fulfil his authoritarian ambitions of disbanding the Hungarian Parliament and moving to govern by ruling through decree (Applebaum, 2020). The rise of authoritarianism is not confined to Western countries. A special issue of Japan Focus highlights COVID-19’s role in the spread of authoritarian governance in South and Southeast Asia (Kingston, 2020). Further, COVID-19 responses appear likely to heighten geopolitical conflicts such as introducing the conditions where a new Cold War could emerge between the US and China (Pugliese, 2020).

A striking symbol of the pandemic is dashboards that display the numbers of infections and deaths in different political territories, but such dashboards poorly capture the unequal impact of COVID-19 (Everts, 2020). One of the most vulnerable categories of people are refugees who are increasingly hemmed in by the hardening and securitisation of borders (Jones, 2016). As of 2014, the number of displaced people surpassed the aftermath of World War II (Ehrkamp, 2017). This was before the current pandemic. With COVID-19, many countries are introducing unprecedented limits on mobility such as preventing all non-citizens from immigrating and requiring lengthy two-week quarantines for all who immigrate. Countries are using the coronavirus as an excuse to further harden borders and spurn desperate refugees (Reidy, 2020). The Trump administration is exploiting the coronavirus to undermine the asylum process by denying and deporting asylum seekers, some of whom are infected with the coronavirus (Lakhani, 2020). COVID-19 has been detected in Cox’s Bazar, a refugee camp for about 1 million Rohingya in Bangladesh, raising fears that the novel coronavirus could have a devastating impact upon the camp’s refugees (Ratcliffe & Ahmed, 2020). Human bodies already faced unprecedented limits to their mobility, and now they face not just more limitations to movement but fewer economic opportunities along with the risks posed by COVID-19.

Many have linked the pandemic to the unfolding climate crisis. For both COVID-19 and the climate crisis, scientists have developed models to simulate how modest interventions in the present will prevent massive suffering later. But science alone has not and will never save us. Without a commitment to democratic processes and equality, scientific solutions will fail to alter the underlying politics that exacerbate unfettered capitalism, rising authoritarianism, and environmental destruction. The impacts of the novel coronavirus on the climate crisis are unclear, but the politics of responses to this pandemic will likely shape the next few decades in which urgent action is needed to avert a deepening disaster (Crist, 2020). COVID-19 is new, but it intersects with the vexing challenges that confront democratic governance. Stopping the novel coronavirus is not just about putting science above politics. We need to continue to attend to the geographies and histories that shape our present to chart a path towards a more just future.

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