

Heroic Politics and the Framing of Public Opinion

- Talk at the conference **Dissensus – Research, Politics, Money and Journalism**,
1. June 2007, Copenhagen

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Introduction

My main purpose of this talk will be to look at the current climate of the political debate, and compare it to some efforts in improving science communication and scientific governance. I will argue that the political climate is characterized by an increasing emphasis on group-enforced emotions instead of rational analysis and that this creates huge problems for science. In particular I will make a diagnosis of the "heroic" politics in America and Denmark and show some examples of how it has seriously challenged the scientific community. Then I will move on to talk about the effects of framing as a tool for shaping public opinion in times of emotionalized politics. Framing is currently heavily discussed in a number of research articles and internet fora. It has come up as an issue because there is a general feeling that scientific reasoning is loosing the battle of popular opinion. Several well-organized ideological groups of reactionary and/or religious bend have been able to shape the political landscapes in recent years, and it looks as if these groups have used some nasty tricks which need to be countered, if we not are to become dominated by them. I will talk a bit about what framing is, how it works, and why it would be a huge mistake to copy such primitive techniques - as some people advocate - and use them for science communication and scientific governance.

Science and decision-making

First of all, we need to point out that when talking about strategic communication and governance there is nothing essentially unique about science from other political issues. It is still believed by many scientists and science journalists that the scientific endeavour is somehow insulated from the day to day problems of legitimization and power because of a superior status of science, which grants a natural authority, to be applied also in its dissemination and governance.

But when confronted with complex decision-making processes in a developed democracy, scientific arguments have become as partisan as the lobbyists in Brussels and in Washington DC. Worse than that. As several sociologists have shown, science has often played the role of the useful idiot, because it is *so easy* to hide personal predispositions behind so-called facts. Numerous research articles have also concluded that the growth of scientific knowledge designed especially for the purpose to resolve political disputes and enable effective decision-making, such as the Danish consensus conferences, have been accompanied by growing controversy and gridlock. In most cases public dialogue in science creates an arena of spin, where transparency is requested, but smokescreens are the outcome. Public dialogue has the tendency to deflect blame from those who are responsible and creates a marked of moods and opinions from which the responsible Minister then can pick at pleasure. So the scientific argument is definitely not the holy

grail of decision-making.

Many of these murky aspects of the relationship between scientific reasoning and policy have been analyzed by scholars in the field of science and technology studies, and instead of repeating these bright people, let me try to diagnose the situation from a more general point of view. If we *really* want to understand the relation between science and politics today, we first need to understand how political debate is done nowadays, especially in the U.S.

Heroic Politics

The current state of American politics is no doubt characterized by emotion over reason. Political debate in the U.S. has been seized by a group of neo-conservatives, who no longer are driven by reasoned analysis of where the world is going, and how to respond to it, but by a *visceral* need to express their anger, their *rage* towards the world. For them, the world is a hostile place because their resentment - their urge for revenge - *needs* a hostile environment so that they can name their enemies and destroy them. This kind of psychology is very well known to us Europeans, because it is the kind of psychology which regularly has popped up in troubled Europe since Achilles vowed to destroy Troja (Sloterdijk, 2006).

For the sake of historical context, let me cite from the first book, the first verse, the first lines of the very first text of European civilization, Homers Iliad:

*Sing, O goddess, the anger of Achilles son of Peleus, that
brought countless ills upon the Achaeans. Many a brave soul did
it send hurrying down to Hades, and many a hero did it yield a
prey to dogs and vultures, ...*

... and so on. Achilles anger is caused by Agamemnon who has taken the beautiful slave Briseis which was promised to Achilles. So he sits outside the tent and growls and has to eat his own vanity. Later it gets worse. Achilles refused to fight against the Trojans because of his feud with Agamemnon. Instead, Achilles best friend and lover Patroclus takes the job and is killed by Hector. All this is the background for Achilles furious rage which later results in his "heroic" battles and his humiliation of the Trojans by dragging Hectors body behind his carriage.

Well, why is this important? It tells about the roots of a primitive psychology which is very much alive in postmodern politics. It portrays the original mould of a *holy anger* where its carrier is *out of control*. It is not *him*, who has the rage. It is the *rage*, which has him, like a god-given bodily fluid streaming through his veins. This is the stuff heroes were made of in hellenic Greece and apparently also in the U.S., and it justifies the destruction of anything which gets in the way. No responsibility, no reflection, just a righteous urge for revenge. If we would find this kind of psychology in a Danish kid, we would surely blame its parents for creating an over-ambitious unbalanced little monster and send it to the school psychologist. But in the halls of power in America infantile psycho-pathologies are *welcome* because they promise to create heroes. American neo-

con politicians *believe* that they are heroes and have the right to act as Achilles did. As justification, *if* they need a justification, some use God, like Bush, others use the opposite - the Devil, disguised as a terrorist or a madman hiding weapons of mass destruction.

When politicians start to believe that they should represent hidden psychological maladies of a population in a democracy they start to act according to their fluctuating emotional states and dismiss any contradictory rational analysis. Their extreme urge to see the world as a hostile place has not only penetrated american foreign politics but also other spheres of public life, such as the media and education, and as we have heard multiple times today, it applies as well to science.

Heroic Politics in Denmark

Also in Denmark there is a government, which is driven by anger and the urge for revenge. It is expressed by the so-called "værdikamp" - a fight over values, where nobody really knows what kind of values we are talking about, but all know what is meant, namely the attack, the slandering, censoring, conviction and destruction of everybody who does not follow the highway of being "Danish". The Danes have always been frightened by everything unfamiliar to them, but now they have started to become afraid of themselves. Instead of thinking, they hide in the ditch and suspect their neighbours. Of course, the political representatives have exploited this situation and promised revenge. They are the aggrieved avengers who so often enjoy power in troubled times.

One of the most grave assaults on science in Denmark was made in 2003 when the new Danish University Law was put into effect. Using frames like "self-ownership", it obliges universities to pay rent for their historical buildings according to market prices, to conduct external auditing, to do earmarked research, and to bow before a governing body with external majority. The only way Danish universities now can make things work is to submit to political agendas and to grind as many students as possible through the system because there is a specific amount of funding attached to every passed student.

It is no exaggeration to call this Danish University Law of 2003 a new variation of intellectual serfdom, a return to medieval villeinage, where researchers and their institutions are held under tight national control. They are expected to use some of their time to "farm the lord's fields" (typically a hobbyhorse of the government or some public fads) and the rest of their time is spent on their own land. Like other types of serfs, they are required to provide other services, in addition to a rent of money or goods. The main purpose of this whole exercise is not at all to support the quest for knowledge and secure academic freedom. The purpose is exactly the opposite: to keep intellectuals from having time to think, to control dissensus and to eliminate a potential contraband.

Let me now turn to framing. If you wish to promote a societal change or attack your enemy, you need too frame your case in a convincing way. In the example of the university law of 2003, the issue was framed by blatant newspeak, calling serfdom for "self-ownership" and enforced services for "development contracts". In some cases you have power enough to just do what you want without much framing, as it was the case recently with the Danish Minister of Science who merged several universities, arguing

that is was more effective, even though all research shows that it is the opposite which is the case. But in most cases you need to use frames in a very strategic and deliberate way.

What is Framing?

What are frames? Frames are thought organizers, devices for packaging complex issues in ways that activate value predispositions. They exist latently in all people and are activated by emphasizing certain interpretations of an issue over others, thereby structuring which parts of reality become noticed. In other words: frame devices are lazy and communicate in short hand the underlying meaning of a frame. They can be catchphrases, slogans, symbols or images (some of the famous ones are for instance "pro life", "flip-flop" Muslim scarfs, or the sign for atomic energy, etc.). Frames are most influential when they resonate with existing religious, ideological or cultural values because they activate favourable predispositions and these predispositions are then used as a powerful filtering device by the public. The fight over intelligent design is a case in point. But many other framing wars in science are being waged right now, starting with abortion and stem cell research and continuing with climate change and nuclear energy.

Recent experiments (de Martino, 2006) with fMRI-scanners have shown that the framing effect is so strong that analytic reasoning persistently gets overridden by emotional choices. Lets take a simple example (Miller, 2006): Faced with a decision between two packages of ground beef, one labeled "80% lean," the other "20% fat," which would you choose? The meat is exactly the same, but most people would pick "80% lean."

When looking directly at brain activity subject to a framing game, the amygdala (A, in the figure) was relatively more activated when subjects chose in accordance with the frame effect. When subjects made decisions that ran counter to their general behavioral tendency, enhanced activity in the anterior cingulate cortex was observed (C, in the figure). This suggests an opponency between two neural systems, with ACC activation consistent with the detection of conflict between predominantly "analytic" response tendencies and a more "emotional" amygdala-based system.

They also showed that decreased susceptibility to the framing effect correlated with enhanced activity in the orbital and medial prefrontal cortex, specifically in the right orbitofrontal cortex (A, in the figure). The findings support a model in which the orbital and medial prefrontal cortex evaluates and integrates emotional and cognitive information, thus underpinning more "rational" (i.e., description-invariant) behavior.

In evolutionary terms, frames have been helpful for the decision process because they cut down information cost and create a feeling of understanding through emotional cues. Frames are no *new* invention and have probably been used since our human ancestors decided to live in social groups. But they are also the perfect resonance chamber for irrationality and group-enforced rage. This is the case especially in a highly mediated and globalized world like ours, where exorbitant numbers of stimuli and emotional symbols are spamming our brain. The overdose makes us literally stupid, because it activates impulse and instinct. Framing is definitely not well suited to convey *new* information, which is what scientists and science communicators normally would think they do.

Frames are in effect anti-science. They may be necessary in communication, but in the context of democratic decision-making where every outcome of a debate is easily regarded as a policy guideline, we get into situations of irrational intoxications and an epidemics of politicians acting like Achilles.

My rather unsettling prediction is that there is no way out of framing, and that public framing wars will just enhance group-based psycho-pathologies where each group gets hung up in the *need* to hate and to destroy the others. The socialization of *every* resentment turns the world into a free-fire zone where anybody who puts his head up out of the nearest ditch is going to get it shot off. In that way one feels safe, but in fact is completely trapped by irrational emotions.

There is no doubt that the increasing use of stealth issue advocacy and framing in science is a movement towards the irrational. It proclaims to use rational arguments in defeating the others, but it is the *fight* which is the important part for them, not the content. It doesn't matter if you burn 23 villages on the way as long as the enemy - the hostile argument - is destroyed. Like Achilles you become a vessel for an emotion. It is not *you*, who has an argument. It is the *argument*, which has you. This applies to all sides of the framing wars. If politically unchecked, frames become the *rule* and not only an *aspect* of democracy.

Taming Framing

But since there is no way around framing, what to do? First of all we need to denounce the idea that scientists should start politicizing their own research and use cheap tricks to get public support. In these neo-conservative times it might sound attractive to move to the offensive by such means, but at a slightly longer time frame, the effects of such policies would be very counterproductive for mankind regardless of the political identification.

The same applies to science journalists and decision-makers. As science communicators we have to support the prefrontal cortex, not the amygdala. That is *not* to say that science journalists - or scientists - should stick "just to the facts". We need to be honest about the limitations of the facts, our point of view and our hidden values and wishes. Deliberate politicizing a scientific issue makes only sense to the degree that it shows hidden rights and wrongs. When going beyond that, and starting to abuse other peoples instincts for promoting or casting doubt about a case, is directly anti-science.

One important way to tame emotional frames and group-enforced anger is to create a plain playing field, where the multiple interests are equally represented in the decision-making process. Instead of relying on the historical authority of Science, of God or of Achilles, we need to see the multiple stakeholders not as enemies but as people having different interests. And no matter how powerful *your* frames or *my* arguments are, we need to seek an inclusive result. That is: to be able to compromise. Communication then becomes a *conversation*, where each part is expected to have something to contribute to the problem at hand. Of course, it also requires sane leaders, and that might take a while.