

DAVID BROOKS SAYS SMART PEOPLE CAUSED TRUMPISM

Posts in this series

David Brooks wrote a too-long article, *How The Bobos Wrecked America*, blaming smart people for Trumpism. I discussed one aspect of this in my last post, focusing on Brooks' use of the term Epistemic Regime. It's a phrase he picked up from (I'd guess) reading a couple of chapters from a book by Jonathan Rauch, *The Constitution Of Knowledge*. I'm reading Rauch's book. The first four chapters discuss the Epistemic Regime as a system we as a society developed to decide what is true.

Rauch follows Charles Sanders Peirce's concept of truth. I discuss this important definition here. Truth in Rauch's sense means that a proposition has been thoroughly checked for error, and so far has held up. Truth, then, just means our best guess at a useful and accurate description. The goal of the Epistemic Regime is to eliminate error, not to establish some objective truth "out there".

The word "epistemic" is related to epistemology, the branch of philosophy concerned with knowledge. Here's Rauch's definition of an ideal Epistemic Regime:

... a public system for adjudicating differences of belief and perception and for developing shared and warranted conclusions about truth.... P. 76.

Rauch's Epistemic Regime is a community of institutions through which individuals cooperate and compete in generating and disseminating new propositions, checking them for errors, and if cleared, fitting them into the store of knowledge, subject to being amended or dumped if later found to be erroneous. There are, of

course, other methods of determining what is true, such as bias-confirming regimes, or those which just accept the word of an authority figure or group.

Rauch's Epistemic Regime is self-organizing. No one controls anything. The communities are open. Anyone willing and able to do the work can participate. It's impersonal, in that conflicts are about propositions, not people.

The range of subjects covered by this Epistemic Regime is large, but it is not all-encompassing. The limits are set by considerations about what we can falsify. For example, we currently think the universe began with a Big Bang, and that we cannot know what happened before the cataclysmic event because it obliterated all evidence.

The general method of construction of truth can be applied to many areas. For example, we can apply aesthetics to decide if Emily Wilson's translation of *The Odyssey* is good. [It is.] We can make warranted judgments about aesthetics, morality, and other fields using tools honed by the Epistemic Regime, such as respect for precedent, persuasive argument, careful attention to detail, and willingness to accept criticism.

This isn't what Brooks drew from Rauch. He claims that over the past few decades a new group of social classes has evolved, one Red, one Blue, and both hierarchical. One of his Blue Classes is the "creative class", which he characterizes as:

... the same scientists, engineers, architects, financiers, lawyers, professors, doctors, executives, and other professionals who make up the bobos [his group from his book *Bobos in Paradise*].

Here's his thesis:

The creative class has converted cultural attainment into economic

privilege and vice versa. It controls what Jonathan Rauch describes in his new book, *The Constitution of Knowledge*, as the Epistemic Regime—the massive network of academics and analysts who determine what is true. Most of all, it possesses the power of consecration; it determines what gets recognized and esteemed, and what gets disdained and dismissed.

Brooks seems to think Rauch's Epistemic Regime is just a group of people, identical to the creative class, or at least overlapping it. That's not what Rauch says.

The Epistemic Regime is a system developed over a long period and followed by a lot of people seeking to increase our knowledge. We act under the Epistemic Regime when we seek knowledge. The habits of thought we use under the Epistemic probably influence us in other aspects of our lives, but I don't root for Notre Dame, or admire Jane Austen, as part of any Epistemic Regime.

The creative class does participate in creation of new knowledge, but it also works in the area of culture, taste, and politics. Tools generated under the Epistemic Regime can be applied to criticize specific aspects of each. But the Epistemic Regime doesn't tell us how to enjoy our lives or which political party to support, because our individual choices can't be falsified. *De gustibus non est disputandum*. *Chacun à son goût*. Each to his own. All societies agree on this point.

No one, and certainly not an entire class, controls the Epistemic Regime. And, the Epistemic Regime doesn't control anyone. Its a system for adjudicating truth as best we can, not of domination.

Brooks seems to think the creative class is homogeneous in cultural matters, which is dumb. The only thing this class uniformly accepts is insistence on Rauch's Epistemic Regime when

working to generate knowledge. Outside that, members are diverse on every social axis.

Brooks tells us that the creative class disrespects the culture of the Red Classes. That makes them resentful so they vote MAGA.

What causes psychic crisis are the whiffs of “smarter than” and “more enlightened than” and “more tolerant than” that the creative class gives off. People who feel that they have been rendered invisible will do anything to make themselves visible; people who feel humiliated will avenge their humiliation.

Brooks doesn't explain the connection between these two sentences, probably because there isn't one.

It's certainly true that there are tastemakers among the creative class, and that they are snotty about it. The snotty people of an earlier generation referred to High and Low Culture. For most of human history cultural superiority was solely a pleasure of the filthy rich, like the Medici or French Aristos. They were scary because they exercised physical power over people's lives. That's not true today. Why would anyone care what the creative class thinks about their cultural and taste preferences? And why would that turn political? Brooks doesn't say.

Discussion

1. Brooks doesn't say anything about the cultural views of the Red Classes that are “dismissed and disdained” by apparently, the entire creative class. I'm pretty sure it's mostly a toxic mixture of self-pity, racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia and other anti-social attitudes.

I'd guess most of the Creative Class doesn't like that toxic mixture. Generally we (I include myself in the creative class, just like Brooks does) think we should try to follow the Golden

Rule. We justify and expand that view with tools provided by Rauch's Epistemic Regime. We try to squelch bad impulses in ourselves and in society. And we don't care if that hurts the feelings of racists, women-haters, homophobes and xenophobes.

2. Brooks is trying to explain why so many Americans reject vaccines and other public health measures. He does this by conflating the creative class with the Epistemic Regime, as if the two were identical. If you reject the creative class then you have to reject the Epistemic Regime and its fruits, like vaccines, but somehow not Ivermectin and monoclonal antibodies. He doesn't even try to justify this absurd idea.

3. Brooks is right that the Red Classes are angry and hostile towards the Blue Classes, but he makes no effort to explain how they got so worked up they'd suicidally risk sickness and death over it. He says it's now become political, but he doesn't explain why anyone would think that makes sense.

He doesn't mention the economic power of the filthy rich, or their role in generating and amplifying the grievances of the Red Classes; or why it seems to be a policy choice of his Republican Party. It's just natural, he says, as if that explains something.

4. In other words, this relentlessly long article contributes nothing to knowledge. You're just supposed to assume that because it's so bloody long and drops a bunch of names it's a brilliant defense of the Trumpian Republican Party to say:

"If only those smart people weren't so rude".