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Zeynep Pamuk

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WHAT FOLLOWS FROM THE PROBLEM OF IGNORANCE?

ABSTRACT: In Power Without Knowledge, Jeffrey Friedman develops a critique of social science to argue that current technocratic practices are prone to predictive failures and unintended consequences. However, he does not provide evidence that the cause he singles out—"ideational heterogeneity"—is in fact a non-negligible source of technocratic limitations, more than or alongside better-known problems such as missing data, measurement issues, interpretive difficulties, and researcher bias. Even if we grant ideational heterogeneity, Friedman’s preferred institutional solution of exitocracy does not necessarily follow. His critical epistemology would also be compatible with radical forms of collective action.

Keywords: democracy; technocracy; expertise; ignorance; social science; prediction.

“I foresee all sorts of unforeseen problems,” remarks Sir Humphrey Appleby, the prime minister from the 1980s British television series Yes, Prime Minister, to his cabinet secretary. The line expresses one of the fundamental facts of political life: there will always be unintended and unwanted consequences. Jeffrey Friedman’s excellent new book, Power Without Knowledge: A Critique of Technocracy (Oxford University Press, 2019), takes this fact seriously and argues that it poses a challenge to the justification of current political institutions, which he believes are overwhelmingly technocratic.
The book starts from the observation that modern states are oriented towards solving social and economic problems through policies designed for specific ends: reducing crime, increasing economic growth, controlling inflation, improving air quality, ensuring product safety and so on. This orientation toward problem solving assumes the ready availability of knowledge that can connect proposed policies to the desired ends, but Friedman argues that the knowledge that would make such means-ends reasoning possible is extremely difficult to obtain, given the profound obstacles facing predictive social science.

Friedman believes that this problem of ignorance should be of central concern to both political theory and political practice. He traces the implications of this epistemic problem for existing political institutions and develops a proposal for the institutions that should supplement them. Two points about the project are worth clarifying from the start. The first is that Friedman uses the word *technocracy* in a very broad sense. Any government or person who attempts to use state power to solve, mitigate or prevent social and economic problems qualifies as a technocrat. This is much broader than the standard usage of the word, which typically denotes rule by technical experts. Friedman challenges not just expert rule, but also more democratic variants of state-led problem solving, such as ordinary government regulation or democratic socialism. Citizens, too, count as technocrats if they support the mission of solving social problems through government action.

The second thing to clarify is that Friedman has a distinct, and in my view more interesting, conceptualization of the problem of ignorance than most scholars writing on this increasingly popular topic. The literature on the so-called problem of ignorance has mostly been concerned with the issues that arise from the well-documented fact that the citizenry is deplorably ignorant of basic facts about politics, which arguably prevents them from making informed political choices. This is the focus of recent books by Jason Brennan (2016), Ilya Somin (2013), and Bryan Caplan (2007), which attack democracy on epistemic grounds. Debates in this area usually involve arguments about whether the kind of knowledge citizens lack is relevant for the decisions they need to make, whether citizens can reliably use heuristics and shortcuts to compensate for their lack of knowledge (e.g., Popkin 1991, Lupia and McCubbins 1998), and whether any of this is relevant for justifications of democracy.
Friedman cuts through this tangle by pointing out that scholars on both sides of the debate are implicitly assuming the availability and accessibility of knowledge—usually to themselves or to fellow social scientists—in order to assess how citizens fare with respect to it. In doing so, they often overstate what is known, for instance because they take agreement among a number of experts to stand in for truth. Both optimists and pessimists about citizen competence are thus too assured of the self-evidence of the relevant facts. By contrast, Friedman wonders if anyone possesses sufficient knowledge to design policies that can reliably be foreseen to bring about more good than harm. This is because social science faces severe obstacles in producing the kind of knowledge that would make this possible. Friedman’s critique of technocracy may at times sound similar to Hayek’s claim that states cannot have access to the knowledge required for effective control of the economy, but it is important to note that Hayek readily admitted that specialized scientific knowledge could be centralized in the hands of experts. His concern was that experts wouldn’t be able to access the dispersed information held by individuals. Friedman, on the other hand, argues that both experts and ordinary citizens may lack the necessary knowledge.

Despite this difference, there is a crucial structural similarity between Friedman’s project and Hayek’s in that they both start from epistemological claims and derive implications for political theory. This effective structure can also be found in others thinkers, including Plato, Hobbes, and Dewey. Arguments with this structure can be opposed in one of two ways: one can either challenge the epistemology and thereby undermine the political theory or challenge the link between the epistemology and the political theory. My goal in this essay is to develop one argument of the first kind and another of the second. The first section raises some doubts about Friedman’s diagnosis of the source of the predictive problems of social science and examines their implications. The second section grants his epistemology and considers what else might follow from it politically besides what Friedman recommends.

The Predictive Problems of Social Science

The observation that the social sciences are not good at prediction is not particularly controversial. There are many explanations for why this is the case: the difficulty of randomized controlled experiments, the
unavailability of data, measurement problems, the inherent subjectivity of concept definitions, design and modeling choices, the ethics of manipulating human subjects … among many others. Friedman is not interested in most of these well-known and well-examined problems that exercise social scientists. Instead, he singles out a different problem: that of “ideational heterogeneity.” Predictive social science is based on the assumption that humans will respond in uniform and predictable ways to changes in external conditions, much like plants or physical objects. However, unlike plants or physical objects, the behavior of humans is determined by their beliefs and ideas, and each individual’s web of beliefs and ideas is idiosyncratic. This is what Friedman (27) calls ideational heterogeneity. Since the social sciences assume uniformity rather than heterogeneity, they are essentially built on a false premise. Technocratic policies may go awry because of their failure to acknowledge and respond to ideational heterogeneity, which results in unintended and unforeseen consequences.

However, there is no evidence in the book that ideational heterogeneity is in fact a major source of the predictive failures of social science. It is not clear, for instance, how it compares in importance to some of the other serious challenges faced by social science mentioned above. Friedman does not undertake a comparative evaluation of different explanations or even attempt to argue that ideational heterogeneity is a major issue rather than a minor or even negligible one. The book’s main argument is framed simply as a possibility: if ideational heterogeneity is widespread and is not counteracted, then technocracy may be prone to bad predictions. Friedman’s argumentative strategy consists in persuading the reader that humans are ideationally heterogeneous and that social science systematically ignores this fact. Both of these seem clearly true, but do not establish the real-world significance of ideational heterogeneity. In the absence of empirical evidence for the magnitude of the problem, it remains plausible that the effects of ideational heterogeneity are in fact negligible, and that technocrats would benefit more from keeping the focus on all the other, better-known limitations of social science. Let me sketch the argument for why this might be the case.

We could think of social science as operating with a background model of human behavior, which is based on the assumption of law-like regularities in human responses to changes in external conditions or stimuli. This assumption is obviously false, and it is hard to imagine anyone disputing this. But all models make some false assumptions for
the sake of simplicity and usability. It is still possible to get pretty good predictions from a model that makes false assumptions. Newton’s theory of gravity is false, strictly speaking, but it is good enough for the predictive purposes of engineering. The important question is whether the assumption of uniformity is useful—or useful enough. As Friedman himself points out (169), it is reasonable to believe that on some issues people do behave very predictably, responding to financial incentives and following widely accepted social and behavioral norms. Other areas may be entirely unpredictable. We cannot tell ex ante how much this assumption will skew the predictions of the model.

Of course, social science often fails to produce good predictions. The difficulty is that even when a model does not produce good predictions, it is hard to establish whether one of the false assumptions of the model is causing the problem or something else, such as measurement errors or researcher bias. It is possible, for instance, that individual heterogeneity is far less significant than cultural heterogeneity or that both are less significant than the inherent causal complexity or randomness of certain events or that all of these would pale into insignificance if we could acquire massive amounts of data on the social world. If our model involves several different false assumptions, it will be impossible to determine which one is causing the problem. Demonstrating the falsehood of an assumption does not get us very far in establishing it as the main reason why the predictions are no good.

To give an example, Friedman (205–7) briefly discusses the problems of external validity facing randomized control trials and suggests that these too are due to ideational heterogeneity. However, he does not discuss other reasons why external validity may be difficult, such as the myriad differences in culture, geography, demographics, political institutions, legal regimes, history and social norms between different contexts. If experimental results from a village in Kenya don’t hold in a village in India, this could be due to innumerable different factors; ideational heterogeneity does not strike me as the most persuasive one. If Friedman wanted to establish that ideational heterogeneity truly is important, he would need evidence that shows, for instance, that different samples of randomly selected people from the same village (or the same university lab) respond very differently to the same policy intervention at around the same time and under similar experimental conditions. This would be a surprising finding that would support Friedman’s hypothesis that idiosyncrasies at the individual level are the crucial
obstacles to prediction and that behavioral regularity is a truly misguided assumption.

My aim here is not to argue against the importance of ideational heterogeneity, but rather to invite Friedman to give more evidence to establish that ideational heterogeneity really is the source of some problems with technocracy more than, or at least alongside, other plausible explanations, which have received more attention from social scientists and philosophers of science (e.g., Cartwright and Hardie 2012). His reluctance to do so may protect him from the charge of over-claiming, but it comes at the cost of reducing the force of his argument. It is disappointing, for instance, that Friedman cannot even rule out the possibility that ideational heterogeneity may have no effects at all in practice.

Why does it matter whether the limitations of technocratic knowledge are due to ideational heterogeneity or something else? Friedman could have listed a range of factors that threaten the reliability of social science and asked what follows from all these issues. This too would have been an interesting line of inquiry. The source of the problem matters because it determines which responses to technocracy would be appropriate: tweak it a little, change it dramatically (if so, in what direction) or abandon it altogether. Many of the widely acknowledged problems of social science could be improved through better social science: bigger data sets, machine learning algorithms for prediction, improved randomized experiments, more sophisticated methodologies, careful assessment of background assumptions, critical scrutiny of subjective judgments and researcher bias, increased norms of transparency and replication. … These could improve social science without attention to ideational heterogeneity. This, I take it, is what well-meaning social scientists are currently striving to do.

Ideational heterogeneity, on the other hand, stands in more fundamental tension with the generalizing aspirations of predictive social science and therefore of the technocratic project. If each individual is truly idiosyncratic, the task of seeking regularities and making general interventions is undermined from the start. Friedman may be right that a perfect technocracy would be fully individualized and would need to be able to predict each individual’s behavior by understanding and interpreting her web of beliefs. The problem is that this is extremely difficult; a “judicious technocracy” that pays attention to the ideas and beliefs of individuals may well be out of reach.
Friedman himself offers technocrats a way out, and it is a plausible one. He points out that despite ideational heterogeneity, there are probably some homogenizing behavioral forces, such as social norms and culture. (I would also add the basic biological and psychological makeup of the human species as well as education and upbringing.) These counteract the effects of heterogeneity and may ensure that humans do in fact behave in predictable ways after all (169). What technocrats need to do is to better understand these forces and improve their knowledge of the conditions under which humans behave predictably and those in which they behave less predictably. In other words, they need to refine and improve their behavioral assumptions so that their model becomes more sophisticated and complex, if still based on strictly false assumptions. Instead of a blanket assumption of behavioral uniformity, they could make the uniformity assumption conditional and contextual. Once technocrats have a better sense of the strength and limitations of their knowledge and their background behavioral model, they could develop policy approaches and decision procedures that are better suited to different degrees of ignorance. They could recognize that they should not attempt prediction in certain areas, while becoming more confident of success in others. In fact, I think establishing the theoretical limits to the possibility of predictive accuracy for an event or system is one of the most valuable things technocrats could do, alongside working to establish the external validity of their findings. All of this is eminently reasonable and does not depend on accepting ideational heterogeneity.

Friedman is deeply pessimistic about current technocrats’ ability to make these improvements, but seems paradoxically optimistic about the possibility of revolutionizing technocracy wholesale. Optimism and pessimism, however, may be largely beside the point. The crucial question is what other alternatives exist. Friedman’s preferred alternative is exitocracy, which consists in allowing people as much freedom as possible to exit social arrangements that they are not satisfied with. He defends this on epistemic grounds, rather than on the basis of the value of individual liberty or choice. He argues that because people possess better knowledge about their own discontentment, allowing them to exit situations that they are not happy with would be on firmer epistemic grounds than making policies based on dubious social scientific claims.

However, this line of argument cannot determine whether ordinary technocracy or exitocracy would bring about better consequences because it is silent on the question of the magnitude of the overall costs.
of the former and the expected benefits of the latter. More generally, philosophical argumentation cannot ground the claim that exit “can, overall, be expected to better address people’s discomforts than can the use of voice” (31) without some evidence comparing the overall states of affairs we could expect from following these two approaches. Exitocracy might exacerbate existing social problems even more than any possible course of policy action and it might also create new and unforeseen problems. Or it might not; we just cannot know. To make his proposal more credible, Friedman could have at least discussed the likely systemic consequences of exit in more detail and explained why allowing discontented individuals to exit would not make outcomes even worse. The claim that individuals know their discontent best is too weak a basis for a proposal that is likely to have systemic ramifications. If we use Friedman’s expansive definition of technocracy as a dedication to solving, mitigating or preventing social and economic problems through policy action, it seems preferable to me to try to improve technocracy as much as possible before we consider alternatives based on exit, simply because facilitating the avoidance of social problems seems worse than collectively seeking better ways to solve them.

**Ignorance and Democracy**

I now want to turn to the relationship between the epistemological critique of social science and the possibility and desirability of democracy. Early on in the book, Friedman divides defenders of democracy into two. On one side is a robust tradition that values democracy on purely non-epistemic grounds—as a check against the tyranny of elites or to realize equality, freedom, or dignity. This tradition does not claim that democracy has any special wisdom, nor does it take wisdom to be necessary to the justification of political authority. Friedman puts Locke, Rousseau, Schumpeter and Popper in this category, among others. On the other side are utilitarians and Progressives of various stripes, who believe that good outcomes are crucial for the justification of authority, and who defend democracy on the grounds that it can effectively solve social problems and advance the common good. These “democratic technocrats” are in the awkward position of either showing that democracy does indeed have this superior epistemic capacity or biting the bullet on the preferability of epistocracy or another wiser form of government.
Friedman’s argument does not fall into either category, but shares the
democratic technocrats’ focus on epistemic criteria. His argument is an
internal critique of technocracy, which maintains that it is not possible
to demonstrate such epistemic superiority in government—for democ-
Racy, epistocracy or any other regime.

Friedman thus believes that democracy can be defended either on
non-epistemic grounds or from a position of naive optimism about its
epistemic advantages. This misses an important third possibility, which
is that a critical epistemology of the sort Friedman favors may be one
of the strongest foundations upon which democracy can be justified.
Those who believe that political or scientific truths are attainable will
be tempted to conclude that political authority should be entrusted to
those who have access to these truths. This was Plato’s view. But if we
start from the belief that it is impossible for anyone to attain such
truths and that such truths will always be subject to deep disagreement,
it makes sense to distribute power equally among citizens—not because
citizens are wise, but because no one is. Democracy can then be justified
as a fair and peaceful way of resolving deep epistemic disagreement in the
absence of an external mechanism that can provide the correct answer.
What legitimates it is not that the outcome will be good, but that every-
one has assented to it.

Hobbes’s moral and political theory was built on the foundation of a
deep skepticism of this sort. Hobbes believed in the impossibility of estab-
lishing truths on both moral and factual matters, such as: “what is to be
called right, what good, what virtue, what much, what little, what meum and tuum, what a pound, what a quart” (The Elements of Law,
II.10.8). His solution to this epistemic quandary was to settle factual
matters through acts of the sovereign—through politics. It was not the
sovereign’s superior knowledge that justified this, but the need to
reach an agreement in the absence of the truth, to avoid conflict and
paralysis. Assuming the difficulty of attaining reliable knowledge thus
frees politics from the pressure for legitimation through claims to truth,
which in turn makes democratic sovereignty truly possible. Note that
this is not an intrinsic-value argument for democracy, but one that
derives a political theory from an epistemological foundation.

It is curious that Friedman does not consider the possibility that the
natural political upshot of his epistemology would be a radical form of
democracy along these lines. He may want to object on the grounds
that this would lead to irrational and dangerous outcomes, but this
One of the most significant contributions of Friedman’s provocative book is to draw attention to the significance of the limits of social scientific knowledge for political theory. This is a productive starting point that can lead to many interesting places. In this essay, my goal has been to imagine a broader range of political conclusions that might be drawn from it. While Friedman ends on a pessimistic and apolitical note, with a defense of the individual’s ability to escape from social problems by literally exiting the system, it is equally plausible to conclude that different forms of collective action could be justified on the basis of the same epistemology, including more radically democratic forms of action. Friedman may be right that neither social science nor philosophy can protect us from the unforeseen consequences of action, but I hope to have shown that both disciplines can have interesting insights to contribute to the debate on what follows from this fact.

REFERENCES