

Fear of Modernity and Progress?

Listening to the most recent EconTalk episode. They spend some time discussing expertise and the range of thoughts on this within the libertarian ideology. They were critical of the cynicism towards expertise while not taking the view that we should centrally organize aspects of society around expertise. I had some problems with their understanding of the issue and haphazard abstractions they used to comment on the subject.

Knowledge accrue and specialized refinement within fields is essential for growth and solving the problems we encounter individually and within the greater society at many levels. As society becomes ever more specialized and the horizons of knowledge become exponentially more vast we need more individuals to specialize in understanding refined corners of knowledge in order to be able to have these realms of knowledge have any use for people.

The contention, held by many libertarians, of expertise isn't in the accrue of specialized knowledge by dedicated and brilliant individuals. The contention lies in the contemporary social belief that these individuals' knowledge shouldn't just be a tool in our choices to refine ourselves, our lives, our companies, our products, and our world around us, but rather unquestionable truth with overt or covert implications on social norms and government policy.

Some libertarians do take a step (or many steps) too far in undermining specialized knowledge by devaluing its importance or by preaching a sort of knowledge relativism. I don't believe the root of this rests on a hatred of modernity, progress, or knowledge, but rather a fear of centralization and tyranny without possessing the needed conceptual vocabulary to understand and express the nuance necessary to properly address the subject.

Expertise is a wonderful tool to enhance our choices within a decentralized environment. When new ideas and new information enter our world and we can experiment with them and create new possibilities, we all are better for it. The unsuccessful ideas fall to the side, and what remains is a tribute to the progress of knowledge and innovation that exists today. When expertise is used to replace our choices we inevitably see every mistake and problem amplified with no means of correction.

The systematic flaws of centralization and knowledge are best left to Hayek to address. However, the individual motivation of libertarians isn't rooted in a deep understanding of Hayek, but rather a fear of tyranny and centralization, and not a fear of modernity or progress.