
Regional

For whom the scientists marched last Saturday

One of the best novels by Ernest Hemingway was “For Whom the Bell Tolls.” That title was taken from the metaphysical poet John Donne’s series of meditations and prayers on health, pain, and sickness published in 1624 when we wrote, in the original version, “No man is an Iland, intire of itselfe; every man is a peece of the Continent, a part of the maine (...) any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankinde; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee.”

Hemingway’s 1940 novel is set during the 1936-1939 Spanish Civil War. The reason he used that title was because of the discussion taking place at that time on whether anybody outside Spain should care about that war. Obviously foreign powers from the right and left were intervening and many saw that war as a prelude of what months later would become World War II.

Last Saturday hundreds of thousands of people – not only scientists – took to the streets of cities around the world to show their support for science. Public demonstrations took place not only in the major capitals of the western hemisphere but in places as distant and surprising as the Fiji Islands in the South Pacific and Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam.

But why the marches? And why now? We are witnessing a worldwide political phenomenon of dismissing intellectual enquiry in general, and science in particular, in favor of an ideology based in populist politics and economic interests. From the right and from the left we hear voices

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spewing any inconvenient fact for political purposes.

Despite many efforts by scientists and others to make scientific knowledge more accessible through TV shows, documentaries, podcasts and the like, science literacy among the general population is at a disturbingly low level. According to the periodic surveys conducted by the National Science Foundation, this country leads the world in the number of people who believe that witches are real. And half of our population thinks that the sun orbits the earth, and not the other way around.

These figures, which could be dismissed as simple curiosities or grounds for late night talk show jokes, are not so funny when we realize that they belong to the same category of thought as the pervasive campaign against the use of vaccines and the denial of human responsibility for climate change, both of which we will pay a heavy toll for in the years to come.

Science has been fundamental for human progress in every aspect of our lives, from medicine to transportation, from communications to food production. But you all know that.

What not everybody knows is that there has been a concerted movement in some circles for years to either dismiss scientific facts or misinform about them. The tobacco, chemical, food, oil, and pharma-

ceutical industries, for example, have consistently manipulated and even attacked scientific facts to serve their own financial interests, regardless of the consequences for our health and that of the planet.

So why are we marching for science?

The reason is very simple. We want, no, we need the people in general and the political class in particular to be well informed before making any decisions that affect all of us. Given the dissatisfaction with the political class, peoples around the world are electing – or permitting to remain in power – politicians who are exploiting the worst of human instincts: racism, xenophobia, intolerance, and vulgarity. We live in an era of the cult of celebrity, rather one grounded in the respect for the thousands who work every day around the world in universities and research institutions expanding our knowledge about ourselves and about the world that surrounds us.

Some have criticized the marches for science for being too political and even “anti-Trump,” given the deep budget cuts his administration has proposed for science, medical research, humanities, and the arts. But the reality is that any big issue for humanity is political because it implies resource allocations, policy choices, and even life-and-death decisions.

In order to discredit the movement these marches represent, some have labeled them “liberal.” The “L” word has had a deep resonance in the conservative movement since it was used in the 1950s and 60s as a stand-in for being soft on communism. Some have even editorialized it as, “A grandstand

play, put on by people who don’t like Trump or the GOP, regardless, that has nothing to do with climate change, alternative fuels or any other science. These folks ought to put their pocket protectors back in their short-sleeved dress shirts and get back into the labs where they belong.” This statement belonged to Ted Diadiun, an editorial board member of the Cleveland Plain Dealer.

If this somehow reminds you of the phrase, “Women belong in the kitchen” that became popular in some conservative circles more than 30 years ago while women were fighting for equal rights, it is not purely coincidental. The intention of silencing dissenting voices is nothing new and is a common feature of totalitarian regimes, left or right. It is just that we are now re-living them via political populism and an exaltation of public ignorance.

But knowledge in general – and scientific knowledge in particular – is not a partisan issue. It is just that special interests have taken over political parties and movements in order to reassert what really matter to them: the bottom line of either ideologies or financial statements. That is why science will always be a problem for those who look at their own interest and not the general wellbeing of the world.

And that is why so many of us were marching Saturday.

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. is a writer and college professor with leadership experience in higher education. He can be contacted through his website at: <http://www.aromerojr.net>