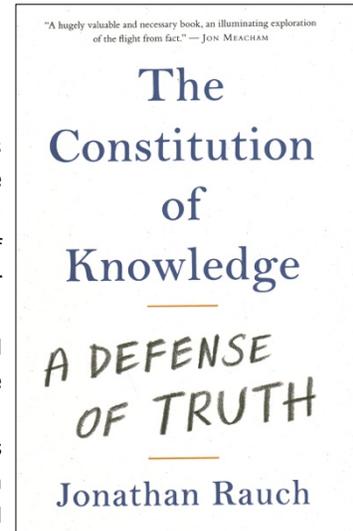


Jonathan Rauch, **The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth**, Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2021, 305pp., \$24.99 (hardcover).

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The word “constitution” carries a heavy load in Jonathan Rauch’s ***The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth***, a provocative analysis of the current global epistemic crises. He uses it both literally and analogically. In the first iteration, it refers to the historic processes of constitution making that created modern liberalism—what Karl Popper (2012) called “open societies.” The historical and philosophical developments that produced the U.S. Constitution serve as Rauch’s literal exemplar. However, he claims that similar rule-governed discursive processes are involved in *constituting* knowledge: in defining and developing liberal science and scholarship, and organizing what he characterizes as “reality-based communities” (pp. 113–115). These are communities built on consensus-based truths that emerge from empirical observation and rational persuasion. These truths remain open to correction as new evidence becomes available: Here Rauch builds on Charles Sanders Peirce’s pragmatic concept of truth.



For millennia, prior to the development of constitutionalism, Rauch argues, serious conflicts were generally resolved by violence. He contends that constitutions rationalized and democratized conflict resolution. Acknowledging that he may push the constitutional analogy too far in places, Rauch maintains that the parallels as well as the differences between the two constitutional projects are informative. The most obvious common denominator is that they are both systematic, voluntary, rule-governed social orders.

In his whirlwind historical and philosophical prehistory of the liberal constitutional movements of the 17th and 18th centuries, Rauch casts three thinkers—John Locke, Adam Smith and James Madison—in leading roles. Smith maintained that a well-organized economic system could maximize self-interested cooperation. Locke argued that experience, not revelation, is the source of knowledge; consequently, he valued observation, pluralism of viewpoints, and persuasion. Madison understood the pragmatics of power politics and recognized the importance of compromise and establishing a balance of powers to prevent tyranny.

The constitution of knowledge, which supports modern science and scholarship, draws on both historical and contemporary strands of theory and practice. For Rauch, two more recent philosophers play key roles: Peirce for his fallibilism, described above, and Karl Popper, not only for his valorization of open societies but also for his “falsifiability theorem.” The falsifiability principle maintains that a claim can only be considered scientific if it is possible to disprove it using disciplinary accredited methodologies.

There are, however, fundamental differences between the two constitutive projects Rauch examines. Political constitutions form the basis for sovereignty; they are enforced by the state or nation. Except in cases

of negligent malpractice, however, science, academic disciplines, and professions are primarily governed by social norms, codes of ethics, credentialing, and peer assessments, not law enforcement. Nevertheless, the two nodes may periodically intersect even though they do not share the same methodologies, as they do share a commitment to the constitution of knowledge.

Despite the philosophical firepower Rauch releases in his opening chapters, the uninitiated should not be deterred. This is not philosophy for philosophers. An award-winning writer, policy wonk, and gay rights activist, Rauch's lucid prose is addressed to an educated general audience. Indeed, the great virtue of the book is its accessibility. It provides brief but excellent primers on the authors and concepts that Rauch relies on to construct his sociology of knowledge and defense of truth: Locke in seven pages, Smith in six, and Peirce in less than a dozen. And it works.

Rauch uses his dissection and defense of constitutionalism to illuminate the forces that are currently undermining U.S. democracy and consensus-based criteria for evaluating truth claims. Familiar contemporary terrain provides much of the data here, including pernicious uses of social media platforms, polarization in politics and culture, Trumpism, conspiracy theories, domestic and international propaganda, authoritarianism, cancel culture, etc. Rauch implicates both the political right and left in these activities, although not equally and not as an exercise in journalistic "both-sidesism"—a professional journalism tenet, which he acknowledges that politicians and propagandists have learned to weaponize. Rauch contends that the right is currently better organized and more prolific and proficient in deploying divisive messaging.

Although it is not his primary focus, he examines the devastating economic effects that the Silicon Valley digital giants have had on newspaper circulation and advertising revenues, and consequently journalism's capacity to fill its charge as democracy's watchdog. The primary products of social media giants are users' attention and personal information, which they sell to advertisers; it is neither truth nor knowledge. By contrast, Rauch argues that the nonprofit Wikipedia proves that Internet technology can host a popular reality-based digital community dedicated to the production of knowledge.

Under chapter headings of "Troll Epistemology" and "Canceling," Rauch assesses recent assaults on truth and expertise. He characterizes trolls as "epistemic sociopath[s]" (p. 155). Whether motivated by toxic politics or sick humor, trolls flood the infosphere with insidious emotionally laden messages that erode the human capacity to distinguish truth from fiction and corrode trust in democratic institutions. Building on Hannah Arendt's (1973) corpus, Rauch contends that trolls cultivate cultural environments susceptible to totalitarianism. He claims that the unrelenting flow of misinformation functions like censorship, "only perhaps better, and certainly easier. Old-style censorship is expensive, inefficient, leaky," especially in open societies (p. 167).

Rauch defines canceling as the "despotism of the few" (p. 189). Where constitutionalism requires persuasion, reasoned argumentation, canceling attempts to silence opposing positions, in some cases by violence. Here Rauch invokes Mill and Madison's views that sharing diverse viewpoints is a necessary precondition to reaching consensus on reality-based truths. Discordant views need to be heard, considered, and subjected to credible standards of criticism.

In what is a less persuasive, possibly even self-contradictory, facet of his argument, Rauch evokes familiar right-wing complaints about the liberal biases of contemporary higher education. This would presumably encompass the constitution of current knowledge since much of it originates in university research centers. Liberalism is, however, inherent in the foundations of the constitution of knowledge that Rauch's own argument affirms. And, openness to experience and a plurality of viewpoints frequently encourages cosmopolitanism.

Rauch urges readers to resist the chilling climate created by canceling. He provides them with an explanatory list of "diagnostic indicators" to determine if they are being canceled rather than constructively criticized (p. 218). Each indicator is defined, explained, and exemplified. They include punitiveness, deplatforming, grandstanding, reductionism, orchestration, secondary boycotts, and accuracy. Rauch also cautions against mistaking the loudest or more skillfully orchestrated voices for consensus and succumbing to the "spiral of silence" (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, p. 43).

Unencumbered by postmodern doubts, Rauch reminds readers that despite some significant challenges and reversals, constitutionalism has well served humanity for more than two centuries. He describes it as

the most successful social design in human history. But also the most counter-intuitive. In exchange for knowledge, freedom, and peace, it asks us to distrust our senses and our tribes, question our sacred beliefs, and relinquish the comforts of certitude. It insists that we embrace our fallibility, subject ourselves to criticism, tolerate the reprehensible, and outsource reality to a global network of strangers. (p. 263)

However, he cautions that constitutionalism does not operate on automatic. He concludes by urging readers to unmute themselves and push back against current epistemic assaults: "Members of the reality-based community need to reinforce our institutions, our solidarity, and ourselves" (p. 234).

Rauch's invocation of constitutionalism as a model for knowledge creation is innovative, yet on even cursory consideration, also obvious. This is a tribute, not a criticism. Rauch reminds us of our heritage and responsibilities as citizens and scholars, which are too easily neglected in midst of floods of digital disinformation. Yet, something more is needed than an eloquent plea to individual readers to speak up and defend democratic institutions. Modeling civility is necessary and laudable, but it is not sufficient when opponents play by different rules and in some cases directly seek to undermine the foundations of constitutionalism.

Karl Popper (2012) is famous for another dictum that Rauch does not consider: the paradox of tolerance (p. 581). Popper strongly supported free expression and constitutionalism as Rauch conceives of it. Nevertheless, he maintained that unlimited tolerance leads to the destruction of tolerance, especially when it involves violence, but also when adversaries refuse to abide by the norms of rational discourse. Trolling, as Rauch defines it, qualifies as intolerance: He describes trolls as sociopaths. The actions of both cancelers and trolls violate the tenets of the constitution of knowledge and the search for truth, as well as the spirit, if not the letter, of historic constitutional protections of free expression. Until he grapples with the paradox of intolerance, Rauch can only take us so far.

References

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