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'Epistemic Closure'? Those Are Fighting Words

By **PATRICIA COHEN**

It is hard to believe that a phrase as dry as “epistemic closure” could get anyone excited, but the term has sparked a heated argument among conservatives in recent weeks about their movement’s intellectual health.

The phrase is being used as shorthand by some prominent conservatives for a kind of closed-mindedness in the movement, a development they see as debasing modern conservatism’s proud intellectual history. First used in this context by Julian Sanchez of the libertarian [Cato Institute](#), the phrase “epistemic closure” has been ricocheting among conservative publications and blogs as a high-toned abbreviation for ideological intolerance and misinformation.

Conservative media, Mr. Sanchez wrote at juliansanchez.com — referring to outlets like Fox News and National Review and to talk-show stars like [Rush Limbaugh](#), Mark R. Levin and [Glenn Beck](#) — have “become worryingly untethered from reality as the impetus to satisfy the demand for red meat overtakes any motivation to report accurately.” (Mr. Sanchez said he probably fished “epistemic closure” out of his subconscious from an undergraduate course in philosophy, where it has a technical meaning in the realm of logic.)

As a result, he [complained](#), many conservatives have developed a distorted sense of priorities and a tendency to engage in fantasy, like the belief that [President Obama](#) was not born in the United States or that the health care bill proposed establishing “death panels.”

Soon conservatives across the board jumped into the debate. Jim Manzi, a contributing editor at National Review, [wrote](#) that Mr. Levin’s best seller, “Liberty and Tyranny: A Conservative Manifesto” (Threshold Editions) was “awful,” and called the section on [global warming](#) a case for “willful ignorance,” and “an almost perfect example of epistemic closure.” Megan McArdle, an editor at The Atlantic, conceded that “conservatives are often voluntarily putting themselves in the same cocoon.”

[Bruce Bartlett](#), a veteran of [Ronald Reagan](#) and [George H. W. Bush](#)’s administrations, wrote that in the last few years, “epistemic closure” had become much worse among “the intelligentsia of the conservative movement.” He later added that the cream of the conservative research institutes, including the [American Enterprise Institute](#) and the [Heritage Foundation](#), had gone from presenting informed policy analyses to pumping out propaganda.

Conservative defenders dismissed the complaints. At National Review, Mr. Levin replied that “Manzi is guilty of ‘epistemic one-sidedness’,” if not “lunacy” and “wingnuttery.” Many of Mr. Manzi’s colleagues attacked him for his takedown of Mr. Levin.

Jonah Goldberg, the author of [“Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left, From Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning”](#) (Doubleday), responded online that liberals had many more intellectual taboos:

“For more than a generation, liberalism craved and ruthlessly enforced epistemic closure.” Richard Lowry, the editor of National Review, called the “kerfluffle” “precious and overwrought,” adding that its very existence proved the vigor of intellectual engagement.

To some degree, the debate over “epistemic closure” reflects the kind of discomfort intellectuals always have with popularizers, but after Mr. Manzi’s public flogging, the phrase turned into fighting words.

[David Frum](#), a former speechwriter for President [George W. Bush](#), [argued at frumforum.com](#) on Friday that the problem was not media celebrities, but rather conservative intellectuals.

“They’re the ones who are supposed to uphold intellectual standards, to sift actual facts from what you call ‘pretend information,’ ” he wrote, quoting a friend. “Rush Limbaugh isn’t any worse than he was 20 years ago. But 20 years ago, conservatism offered something more than Rush Limbaugh. Since then, the conservative elite has collapsed. Blame them, not talk radio.”

As the contretemps heated up, liberals and commentators outside the conservative circle chimed in. Over the weekend Mr. Levin and others took a couple of additional swipes at Mr. Frum and Mr. Manzi.

Last month Mr. Frum himself provoked an uproar when he wrote in a [column titled “Waterloo,”](#) after Congress passed the health care bill, “We followed the most radical voices in the party and the movement, and they led us to abject and irreversible defeat.” To conservative and Republican loyalists, Mr. Frum is a Neville Chamberlain-type appeaser who is willing to accept a kind of liberalism lite. After his column appeared, Mr. Frum said, he was fired by the American Enterprise Institute.

Ever since Richard M. Weaver wrote his bracing conservative manifesto in 1948, “Ideas Have Consequences,” the title phrase has been a guiding maxim for the movement. But conservatives like Mr. Frum worry that the type of ideas Weaver was referring to are in short supply these days.

At the moment, the people leading the way on the right are disparate grass-roots [Tea Party](#) activists who are operating without a leader or shared ideology.

“Conservative intellectuals are in eclipse at the moment,” Steven F. Hayward, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, said during a telephone interview.

Mr. Bartlett, who lost his job at the Heritage Foundation after accusing George W. Bush of betraying the Reagan legacy, said in an interview: “Every intellectual movement needs to constantly question itself; otherwise it becomes stale. But conservatives have sort of reached a position of intellectual closure. They don’t think there are any new ideas of particular interest to them. Their philosophy is fully formed. The only question is how best to implement conservative ideas in the political debate.”

He mentioned the Foundation’s creation last month of Heritage Action for America, a political lobbying arm unconstrained by the limits imposed on nonprofits, as part of the shift from analysis to lobbying.

In his blog Mr. Sanchez pointed to a comment at redstate.com about the Manzi-Levin hullabaloo that epitomizes the attitude: “I DON’T CARE,” if every fact and figure is correct, the poster wrote; “more importantly, the principles were timeless and correct.”

George H. Nash, a conservative historian and most recently the author of “Reappraising the Right: The Past and Future of American Conservatism” (ISI Books), described the first generation of modern conservatives as the “era of the intellectual,” led by people like [William F. Buckley](#) and Russell Kirk, who laid down the movement’s theoretical and historical foundations.

The second, which began in the late 1970s and continued through George W. Bush’s administration, was the era of “applied conservatism,” he said. This was when conservatives started to build a large infrastructure of research organizations for scholars and experts who created policy initiatives.

A third generation of modern conservatives is now taking shape, he added,

although its defining characteristics are still unclear.

In trying to explain possible reasons for “epistemic closure” among fellow conservatives, Noah Millman, who blogs at theamericanscene.com, suggested that generational differences might be at the root of the problem. Unlike earlier movement members who honed their arguments while out of power, he said, “Young conservatives in the late 1980s and early 1990s saw their movement go from strength to strength — and learned that conservatism was always right and that people who didn’t see that were fools.”

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