



A Plague of Experts

Michael T Devaney

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There are experts on real estate, witchcraft, serial killers and terrorism. Personal service experts teach us how to exercise, manage our time, organize our closets, control our dog and talk to our children. Cable television orchestrates an endless parade of talking heads willing to pontificate on any subject while Craigslist and a variety of other web sites render access to expert advice that is only a mouse click away. The provision of expert witnesses for litigation is a burgeoning industry. If the price is right, litigants in civil trials can always find "hired guns" willing to advocate the opposite side of any argument. Despite being on the losing side half the time, expert witnesses have little trouble finding work. Some people, such as football coaches riding a winning streak, can find themselves elevated from the rank of "expert" to the lofty realms of "genius." With refreshing candor New York Giants coach Jim Fassel reminded the sports media: "there are no geniuses in our business, we're all PE majors coaching PE majors." This book is a critique of experts; not expert bakers, personal trainers or even trial lawyers and physicians whose clients in their private dealings bear the benefits and costs of their advice. Rather, it is a critique of big picture experts who dispense expertise on behalf of the multitudes. Specifically, these are the experts whose bad advice can have dire consequences for shareholders, employees, consumers, patients, taxpayers, students, soldiers and citizens. Because so many experts are affiliated and/or produced by universities, higher education is subjected to particular scrutiny. I take a decidedly pro-market stance throughout the book but also advocate on behalf of other bottom-up processes. This is not a book on epistemology, the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of human knowledge, nor is it a polemic against government, despite the fact that experts employed in the public sector number among the most dangerous practitioners of misguided expertise. The danger derives not from the public sector per se, but from the ability of the expert to marshal the top-down legal authority and resources of government in the practice of their specialty. "Government" is an amorphous institutional construct; I take the position that one must be a person in order to be an expert.

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