

Both social democrats and neoliberals have struggled to make concrete sense of the attractive idea that science is a public good. In the mid-twentieth century heyday of the welfare state, the idea was invoked to explain why public taxes should be used to subsidize the university education of a relatively small portion of the population. In this context, 'science as a public good' referred to the 'added value' that university-trained people provided to the rest of society through their knowledge, skills, etc. With the rise of the 'knowledge economy' in the 1980s, 'science as public good' was seen as part of 'human capital' development, which meant that everyone should acquire academic credentials to make society more prosperous and productive. However, it is not clear that either of these policies have made good long-term economic sense. A key problem here is that science isn't naturally a public good but must be made such. Science naturally favours discovery and innovation, processes that create a strong epistemic distinction between those 'ahead' and 'behind' the arc of organized inquiry. Moreover, this distinction is promoted by a peer review process that routinely conflates judgements relating to 'quality control' in the strict sense (i.e. judgements about the adequacy of evidence and reasoning on behalf of knowledge claims) and judgements relating to the prestige or fashionableness of topics of inquiry or the theories used to explore them. While many follow Kuhn in believing that such 'streamlining' of inquiry is necessary for science to make progress, others – including Popper and Hayek – regard it as tantamount to 'rent-seeking' behaviour that turns science into a 'club good'. In that case, science in some sense needs to be 'demystified' as a form of knowledge in order to become a public good. Several lines of thought will be examined in relation to this aim, including the role of undergraduate (i.e. non-professional) education, internet search engines, as well as more historical efforts to promote 'proletarian science' and a 'universal language of science'.