
Politicizing science through concepts? A closer look at chemical elements in the USSR

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Existing philosophical accounts on science and society have predominantly focused on democratic societies. This talk attends to nondemocratic settings by examining the politicization of scientific concepts in the Soviet Union, with special focus on the notion of chemical elements. The Russian chemist Dmitrii Ivanovich Mendeleev (1834-1907) is famous for defining the chemical element as an abstract concept that corresponded to the idea of an atom. This he distinguished from elemental material endowed with physical properties. This talk tracks the reception of Mendeleev's distinction in the USSR during Andrei Zhdanov's (1896-1948) campaigns of the late 1940s. Soviet philosopher and historian of chemistry Bonifatii Kedrov (1903-1985), who wrote extensively on Mendeleev's elements, diminished the role of Mendeleev's distinction and elevated the idea that chemical elements could be defined in terms of their place in the periodic system. Closer attention to this case reveals that humanistic science studies can become politicized not only in overt, explicit ways. The subtle influences can be equally distorting and go unnoticed to an untrained eye.

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