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Preserving reason: a rationalist defense of the ‘Western *telos*’ in social science and the humanities

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Abstract

I discuss some of the current challenges to the social sciences/humanities and contend that their impact, marked by epistemological confusion and ill-founded accusatory discourse against the basics of open scientific debate and empirical methods, is damaging and undermining rational exchange. There is notable variety across disciplines, but contestation is rife. I affirm the existence and value of a historical Western *telos*, as a scientific-epistemological ‘project’ driven both by basic curiosity and (material) interests. In the face of some justified but also some grossly overstated accusations of science, especially during the past two decades, I plead for renewal and recalibration of such a *telos* (be it Western or other) based on the intrinsic value of sound, evidence-based science and non-justificationist critical rationalism, not the least because the proposed alternatives – slighting evidence-based reasoning and advocating the use of personal experience/bias as authoritative, like in ‘identity politics’ – hold little promise.

Keywords

epistemology, scientific method, Western *telos*, rationalism, anti-science movements

Thoroughly conscious ignorance is the prelude to every real advance in science”

James C. C. Maxwell (1831-1879)

Introduction: contestations on the *telos*

Western social science and humanities are (again) said to be in crisis, and there are indeed good reasons to be worried. In contrast to earlier waves of self-critique (Marxist in the 1960s

and 1970s, and deconstructionist/post-modernist in the 1980s-1990s), the current critical moment is shaped by fragmented, subjectivist epistemology, by the transformative impact of social media use and discourses of 'identity politics'¹, and of late also by the so-called 'decolonisation' of knowledge and/or intellectual forms of 'wokeism', the latter defined as an activist political attitude showing awareness of inequalities, social justice issues and the need for greater inclusivity (in academia, corporations, the job market, politics, etc.).² The rationalist approach – here simply defined as the critical, reasoning attitude, via which we can work towards intersubjectively shared and plausible statements and interpretations of (phenomena in) reality or the world around us – is often under attack, but not with rational means or arguments.

The growing impact of these critical tendencies – also notably fuelled by anti- or decolonialist protest in Africa (*e.g.*, most prominently since 2015 in South Africa: not only the 'Rhodes must fall' – 'Fees must fall' protests but also the clamour for radical curriculum change³) – is partly a sound corrective to existing inequalities and discriminatory assumptions or practices, in society and academia alike, that need to be addressed. But these tendencies now increasingly seem to evolve into problematic ideological contestation and even the rejection of evidence-based, critical science, not only by activists but also by academics⁴. Yet moves to make science directly subservient to moral-political agendas cannot satisfactorily deal with the indignities and pains of racism and minority denigration. To address the lasting effects of past inequities, I argue that we will remain in need evidence-based, comparative research and not selective subjectivism and relativism.

The emergence of science criticism, identity politics and related responses, especially since about 2014, is also a *generational* phenomenon and an *institutional* issue – they resonate among the student generations of today, impacted by overstressed 'social media' use⁵, and also in a problematic manner among university administrators in the US, the UK and Europe. As said, there are some legitimate reasons for the spread of this science criticism. One is an underlying desire for more 'inclusion, diversity and equality' (DEI) – scientific activity is indeed open-ended and should be accessible to all capable of pursuing it – although

¹ cf. FUKUYAMA 2018.

² See especially RAJASINGAM (2023). She refers to an entry in the OED on the meaning of 'woke'. Originally: 'well-informed, up-to-date'. Now chiefly: 'alert to racial or social discrimination and injustice'; frequently in 'stay woke'." This paper will not delve into the 'woke debates'. For more discussion on the issue, see SAGE (2022), COFNAS (2002), and SCHRÖTER (2024).

³ cf. JANSEN 2019.

⁴ cf. DREGER 2015; WAYNE 2022; MUND 2023.

⁵ cf. HAIDT 2022.

the concepts of DEI are not straightforward and tend to become a new dogma (DEI ‘evangelism’), for example in terms of ‘equality of outcome’. Another is the sway of uncritically held assumptions in many academic fields,⁶ although criticism of these is currently too often extended into an ideological ‘decoloniality’ discourse with scholars pitched against each other on two sides⁷. The problem, however, is that the ‘decoloniality’ label is in danger of being generalized to apply to all scientific debate and discourse, way beyond its original political context. In that broad sense, it loses its meaning, because regardless of background we are all constantly influenced and challenged by other people’s opinions and theories. As anthropologist Mary Douglas once said,⁸ “[...] our colonization of each other’s minds is the price we pay for *thought*”. And as Nigerian-American academic O. Táiwò noted in the context of Africans: the ‘decoloniality’ approach tends to deny Africans agency and seriously harms scholarship in and on Africa⁹ and he added that it can become an easy discourse of complaint.

The scientific endeavour of reasoned, evidence-based inquiry– in both the STEM fields and in social science and the humanities – is better not sacrificed to ideological elements external to good scientific practice itself. Otherwise, the intrinsic values of the scientific endeavour are traded for instrumental ones – at the whims of the day. I support Alice Dreger’s view here, who in her 2015 book¹⁰ said that in science, the critical pursuit and use of evidence is the most important ethical imperative of our time – i.e., not ideology, collective identity concerns, notions of primarily serving ‘social justice’, or right-wing anti-science attitudes and conspiracy-thinking, etc. Particularly worrying to me is that this (epistemological) view on the value of evidence-based, open, critical science is now increasingly questioned even by many of today’s social scientists as well as university managers – although they often still posture as ‘sharing’ it.

Here I sketch some of the current challenges to the social sciences based on three recent ‘cases’ of such contestation and contend that the impact of the ‘critical’ tendencies just mentioned is damaging and subversive but varies across disciplines (*e.g.*, strong in anthropology, ethnic studies, etc.; less so in archaeology) and is always contested.

⁶ For example, in psychology, cf. SCHULSON (2020) and STANOVICH (2021).

⁷ cf. TRISOS, AUERBACH and KATTI 2021.

⁸ DOUGLAS, Mary 1975.

⁹ TÁIWÒ, O. 2022, p. 3-4

¹⁰ And in many lectures available online, *e.g.*, DREGER, Alice, *Truth or dare? When science meets activism*. [online]. Utrecht University Studium Generale, 2017 [cit. 24. 11. 2020]. Available from: www.sg.uu.nl/series/truth-or-dare-when-science-meets-activism and <https://gwst.umbc.edu/korenman-2016>.

Like Doug Stokes¹¹, I argue for the existence of a historical *telos* of the West, rooted in a scientific ethos, and plead for its renewal. What exactly *is* the *telos* and is there one in the West? To begin with, it is a diverse 'civilisational' ethos, a core of shared, organising ideas or values, evident in law, religious tradition, national education, or politics developed and cultivated in the course of history. Although, as Karl Popper said, history has no meaning, a civilisational entity or society can produce one in certain subfields. Historian Niall Ferguson¹² has argued that 'the West' (at the danger of over-generalising) has historically taken off from 'the Rest' via six 'killer apps',¹³ as he calls them. One of these apps is *science*, understood as the quest for knowledge and investigation of phenomena and testing and verification.¹⁴ It no doubt has historical roots in the Greek worldview¹⁵ that, in modified form and via the Romans and Arabs became universalised in the West, and developed for real since the 17th century, in 'dialogue', or rather in opposition to, religious traditions (cf. Spinoza's magnificent 1670 *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*). Of course, the view that since the onset of the scientific-economic revolutions of the mid-19th century everyone in western societies became 'modern' and scientifically-oriented is misleading at best¹⁶. But one of the normative drivers of social, military, and economic development, led by a minority, and mostly elite, undoubtedly was science, which like in Greek antiquity since Thales set itself the *aim* to examine, explain, control, predict, and manage the human and non-human worlds. Science and its broad influences became part of our broader *cultural history*. Scientific efforts or techniques were not the monopoly of the West, however, as centuries *before*, other traditions were much more 'advanced': the Chinese (technology), Indians (mathematics) and Arabs (astronomy)¹⁷. But at least since the 17th century, a *telos* of basic, future-oriented inquiry – in the shadow of critiques on the dominant theological worldview – was culturally re-defined or reset by Western elites and became normative. Siegel claims that the '*cultivation of reason*' was a fundamental intellectual ideal in Western tradition¹⁸. All these lofty words do not deny that the ideal of reason often remained one of a minority and failed to prevent persecution and mass violence, occurring often due to its crass instrumentalization. Indeed, 'the West' has one

¹¹ STOKES 2019.

¹² FERGUSON 2011.

¹³ These 'killer apps' are: the development and use of competition, science, property rights, medicine, consumer society, and the work ethic. Science stands out as the key element of the *telos* due to its explicit future-oriented character.

¹⁴ FERGUSON 2011, p. 67-70.

¹⁵ cf. CROMER 1993.

¹⁶ cf. LATOUR 1993.

¹⁷ cf. FERGUSON 2011, p. 11.

¹⁸ SIEGEL 2017, p. 3.

of the worst records of ‘irrational’ mass violence – due to politics. And as Jarvie observed: “[f]ar from always being socially positive, the pursuit of truth [science, J.A.] can be socially destructive.”¹⁹

This being said, we nonetheless *can* identify the *telos* – a cumulative historical by-product (*not* a pre-set aim) of non-theological reflection, development of civic and political ‘rights’, and ‘objectivist’ scientific experimentation and development certainly since the late 17th century, which has had a tremendous wider societal impact since. In its early 21st century renewal moment, I would plead for seeing this *telos* as best embedded in re-affirming the attendant intrinsic values of critical, evidence-based science and ultimately, a self-critical, pancritical rationalist (PCR) epistemology (as developed by philosopher W. Bartley 1984²⁰) – with expanding circles of identification and inclusion. This PCR does not seek verification, is anti-positivist, and holds every assertion, theory and knowledge claim open to criticism, refusing ‘infinite regress’ to ideological, fideist, or value positions²¹.

The groundbreaking ideas underlying this approach, notably those of William Bartley, are still much discussed²² but his basic insights on the matter are adopted here. Bartley defined his approach as ‘pancritical rationalism’ – an extension of Karl Popper’s idea of the criterium of ‘falsifiability’ as marking scientific from non-scientific statements. Bartley’s innovative and more radical view used the principle of ‘criticizability’ and makes rationalism self-referential, and this obviates the need for ‘faith in reason’ as a founding principle²³. A pancritical rationalist approach thus works with a non-hierarchical model of rationality that rejects any ‘foundational authority’ (*i.e.*, any ideological or ‘belief’ stance) and holds everything up for criticism – even the ideas of criticism and logic itself –but retains that what cannot (yet) be refuted.

Science and ‘truth’

Philosophically speaking, humans have *ratio*, but are clearly not consistently ‘rational’ in thought and action. They are more led by emotion, intuition, and feelings; scientists not excluded. But researchers ultimately (must) appeal to ratio and argument in making knowledge claims, which they then offer – in principle – for criticism, testing and improvement. In much of contemporary academic discourse, notably in the social sciences,

¹⁹ JARVIE 2001, p. 558

²⁰ cf. ROWBOTTOM and BUENO 2009.

²¹ BARTLEY 1980.

²² cf. ROWBOTTOM and BUENO 2009, TALIGA 2022, CHMIELEWSKI 2022.

²³ See BARTLEY 1984, p. 118; GATTEI 2002, p. 246.

this view is now contested, as people now often appeal to extra-scientific authority, fads, group interests or issues of identity as *justification* for backing claims.²⁴ This occurs both on the 'Left' and 'Right'. Needless to say, this position is difficult to accept because it tends to flout the aims of science and the critical appraisal of its claims, although it should not be forgotten that 'experience' can also be the basis for knowledge, in combination with other sources and if held liable to critical appraisal. But nothing in science should be 'justified', all should be (able to be) criticised. In science one just cannot 'prove' anything – this idea is a remnant of justificationism. The core notion of justificationism is that 'knowledge is truth which is proven'. But this is a misconception²⁵.

While the *telos* clearly exists and has shaped the Western scientific endeavour, it is often ignored in various waves of 'criticism' based on identity performance, social-psychological grievances or subjectivist positioning. Indeed, many critics are even loath to argue on facts and evidence – rejecting this form of discourse in favour of confessions and the use of arguments from personal 'authority'²⁶. This approach might be seen as a hypertrophied development of 'interpretivism'. Interpretive methods are of course valid in social sciences such as anthropology, literary studies and sociology²⁷, but the current emphasis on them has led many practitioners into a rejection of 'scientific', deductive, hypothesis-testing research and even of the ethical basics of science as an open-ended, honest quest for knowledge and truths established in critical, dialogic form.²⁸ While 'the truth' may not exist or not be knowable in full form, it is a regulative idea that leads curiosity-driven research about reality, about conditions that exist independent of our subjective minds. 'Truth' ultimately reflects the least persuasively criticized ideas and claims about 'what is the case'.²⁹ But as Cromer³⁰

²⁴ A painful example is the attempted barring of Elizabeth Weiss (San José State University, USA) by indigenous researcher-activists of research on prehistoric North American skeletal remains, because she was not a 'native American' (even if she complied with all existing laws regarding this matter). See: WEISS, Elizabeth. *Indigenous activists are targeting my research. My own university is helping them.* [online] Quillette, 2022 [cit. 15. 7. 2023] Available from: <https://quillette.com/2022/08/18/indigenous-activists-are-trying-to-end-my-academic-career-my-own-university-is-helping-them/>. A related example is the rather embarrassing and controversial paper by MARA and THOMPSON (2022).

²⁵ WEIMER 1977, p. 2

²⁶ See e.g. MARA and THOMPSON 2022.

²⁷ cf. LITTLE 1995.

²⁸ As indeed already seen in the correspondence of the 17th century Royal Society. A good example of critical debate resulting in better understanding, i.e. knowledge, might be Melford Spiro's persuasive reinterpretation of Malinowski's theory on the absence of the 'Oedipus complex' among the matrilineal Trobriand people – a classic case in anthropology (SPIRO 1982). Another recent example is G. Hanlon's (2023) fascinating study of infanticide in Europe: revising existing knowledge based on a re-evaluation of all work done on it so far and producing a new explanation based on a host of new data.

²⁹ Whether it would imply 'correspondence' to external reality, is opening up another discussion.

³⁰ CROMER 1993, p. 3-4.

succinctly said: “science is ‘analytic’ and ‘objective’, and traditional human thinking is ‘associative’ and ‘subjective’.”³¹

There is an over a century-old debate on such ‘naturalist-scientific’ vs. ‘hermeneutic-interpretive’ approaches to the study of humans and society³². While the two camps may never be entirely reconciled and the temptation is great to resolutely choose one over the other, some efforts at dialogue are continuing, and no doubt a perspective based on complementarity ultimately seems the most fruitful. In anthropology, the hermeneutic approach has long been prevalent in the form of interpretivist, and more recently, subjectivist-witnessing-based accounts. As Descola³³ have noted, in US anthropology, *culturalism* has long dominated the discipline, making it “[...] a branch of literary hermeneutics, and societies studied by ethnologists texts to be deciphered” (my translation, J.A.), which they regret.

However, as Daniel Little³⁴ has shown years ago in an excellent paper, despite differences in framing and emphasis, the interpretive approach is also scientific (see below), and like the hard ‘sciences’ approach, relies on rational argument, testing, critiquing, and searching for the ‘best possible explanation’ of observed/experienced phenomena. Both approaches are thus necessary and legitimate, and a strict separation is often misguided. In addition, one could speak of a ‘division of labour’ rather than of an unbridgeable epistemological divide. There is no logical need to make the hermeneutic-interpretive approach subservient to explicitly subjective or ‘witnessing’ methods of ‘proof’ or evidence. But the debate often still proceeds along the rhetoric of two polar ‘opposites’.

It could be claimed that what ‘sound science’ and critical thinking canons *are* has basically remained *the same* for years, certainly since the 1970s debates on epistemology and (critical) rationality³⁵. I here follow Little³⁶ in describing it as evidence-based research with three epistemic features: “an empirical-testability criterion, a logical coherence criterion, and an institutional commitment to intersubjective processes of belief evaluation and criticism.”

While what sound science in practice *is* has remained fairly stable, the responses to it have changed, as perhaps has the level of knowledge and openness of current student generations and the extent of marketing strategies of higher education institutions in the

³¹ CROMER (1993, 21) interestingly said: “At its root, objectivity is simply respect for the critical opinions of others.”

³² cf. ZAMIRA-BONILLA 2011.

³³ DESCOLA et al. 2022, p. 317.

³⁴ LITTLE 1995, p. 43.

³⁵ cf. CROMER 1993; JARVIE 2001.

³⁶ LITTLE 1995, p. 42.

Western world – worst in the USA and the UK – to attract and process ever more students at all cost rather than safeguarding independent science.

Three Cases

I here present three examples as 'cases' of contestation seemingly going against the Western *telos* as shaped by science. The academics discussed were doing their job as researchers/teachers but met with criticism that went beyond constructive scientific appraisal or evaluation. They became the issue of vehement contestation. This should have taken the form of scientific debates/dialogues that should have proceeded without policing or 'cancelling' the contested authors by colleagues who theoretically disagreed and rejected empirical data. In the cases sketched, however, contestation often amounted to attacking the academics' legitimacy on questionable grounds and rejecting their data on primarily ideological motives³⁷. Such an approach also prevents full debate and criticism of methods and evidence– and this kind of 'immunization strategy', based on irrational grounds, is scientifically hard to accept.

Chagnon – pathbreaking anthropologist

A well-known case in anthropology centres on the figure of Napoleon Chagnon (1938-2019). His anthropological work among the Yanomamö people was widely known via his bestselling book, *Yanomamö: the Fierce People* (which went through six editions). A dispute on his work and his subsequent blacklisting by the American Anthropological Association fits into the long-standing debate mentioned above between the hermeneutic-*Verstehen* and more natural-science approach of *Erklären*, e.g., via deductive testing and quantification. Napoleon Chagnon, as a 'hard science' anthropologist, was harshly attacked by a group of interpretive anthropologists, among them Leslie Sponsel, Terrence Turner and Marshall Sahlins, based on the falsely conceived journalistic account by Patrick Tierney in 2000, incorrectly accusing Chagnon and his co-researcher James Neel, among others, of 'genocide' (via allegedly spreading a measles epidemic among the Yanomamö). These accusing anthropologists were led by their own restricted view on what anthropology should be: only a cultural-interpretive, not a deductive-explanatory enterprise using 'biological' variables, and they used the faulty assertions by Tierney as evidence. The case turned into an enormous row in American

³⁷ cf. also BOGHOSSIAN 2022; SALZMAN 2021; DREGER 2015.

anthropology³⁸. Chagnon had done work on Yanomamö violence – aggression, homicide, and village fights – and advanced evolutionary hypotheses on their behaviour in the light of their history, kinship, and sociocultural organisation. The origins and details of this row will not be discussed here (because it is well-documented; cf. also Dreger 2011, 2015; Jarvie 2015). But the case is telling because of the *institutional* efforts of negatively labelling him as a kind of ‘heretic’. This went via the professional organisation, the American Anthropological Association,³⁹ which played a questionable role in taking the many dubious accusations at face value and, I argue, made Chagnon a scapegoat. Various investigations followed, including a damning but largely spurious AAA ‘Taskforce’ report in 2002 directed at Chagnon. His health seriously suffering under this decade-long barrage of critique, Chagnon had to take early retirement. He had also been prevented from doing further fieldwork among the Yanomamö in Venezuela-Brazil. The string of accusations, unsupported by Yanomamö amongst whom Chagnon had worked, was eventually refuted (*e.g.*, by Gregor and Gross 2004), and the Taskforce report was rejected by an AAA members’ majority vote in 2005 (although the report stayed on the website until 2009⁴⁰). Chagnon eventually responded to his critics in his fascinating but unfortunately often-overlooked book *Noble Savages* (2013).

While Chagnon’s sociobiology-inspired approach and data on the Yanomamö can certainly be criticised in their details and underlying assumptions, and have shown the need for more testing, the story of exaggerated accusations by a journalist and a questionable campaign by his ‘culturalist’ opponents is in fact a dismal one, led more by ideology than by evidence. In his 2013 book, Chagnon himself indicated that although an evolutionary anthropologist, he was *not* opposed to cultural interpretations to come to a more comprehensive theory of human behaviour⁴¹. Today the chasm is still not bridged, neither in terms of the roles of the two ‘epistemological’ positions involved nor on the possibility of their combination and/or collaboration. The excessive culturalist critique foreclosed dialogue on contents, denied the idea of an academic ‘division of labour’, and was not open to adversarial collaboration efforts to try and assess the evidence from different points of view. The role played by ‘colleagues’ and by the AAA was more than dubious⁴². This affair arising in the wake of Tierney’s 2000 book was perhaps a foreboding of things to come in American academic life in other scientific domains 20-25 years later.

³⁸ cf. DREGER 2015, p. 143-45.

³⁹ The AAA already had a problematic relation with the concept of science: see esp. Dreger 2010.

⁴⁰ cf. DREGER 2015, p. 145.

⁴¹ CHAGNON 2013, p. 31.

⁴² See JARVIE 2015.

The Roland Fryer case

This second case, on Roland Fryer, garnered notable attention⁴³. Fryer is a brilliant Black sociologist at Harvard, and his meticulous study of US police violence over a longer period⁴⁴ indirectly fitted into the ongoing debates on (racial) discrimination and inequality in the USA. His empirical research found that in many US cities Black suspects were *less likely* to be fatally shot by police than white suspects – in contrast to received opinion. He did not deny racial differences in police use of non-lethal force, but concluded also that there were “no racial differences in officer-involved shootings.” The paper was a study of the empirical evidence and did not set out to make ideological points. Based on the data Fryer dismantled several misconceptions. In the heated media discourse in the wake of the George Floyd case – the indefensible killing in May 2020 of a Black man by bigoted Minneapolis police officers – his analysis of the evidence was ‘politically incorrect’ and not accepted by many – although it was scientifically sound. While matters of his sampling and other details could be argued with, the evidence criticized blanket ideological points made beforehand by partisan commentators on the US police. Critics – for example those allied to the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement – tried to take the study down with such an ideological approach and by motivated reasoning (*i.e.*, reasoning geared to find evidence/arguments that support one’s own opinion; in other words, explicit bias), also marshalling convenient sexual harassment charges to discredit him⁴⁵. He was demoted and barred from research. The point is: reality was more complicated than ideology suggested, and the efforts to block such pioneer empirical research were unfair and misplaced. The proper answer would have been serious criticism; not trying to take him out of circulation. Disturbing was that Harvard University quickly gave in to the criticisms, demoted him from his position, and cut his research funds.⁴⁶ A ‘political’ response to a scientific paper under the pressure of seemingly populist critique. Fryer’s paper is certainly criticisable, but it led to sound debate about the evidence⁴⁷, and without denying major problems in the US police force, it nuanced the preconceived public picture of it. After two years in the cold, Fryer was reinstated by Harvard to his previous position.

⁴³ See MONTZ, Rob. Why did Harvard University go after one of its best Black professors? [online] Quillette, 2022. [cit. 11. 7. 2023]. Available from: <https://quillette.com/2022/04/15/why-did-harvard-university-go-after-one-of-its-best-black-professors/>.

⁴⁴ FRYER 2019.

⁴⁵ See MONTZ 2022.

⁴⁶ MONTZ 2022.

⁴⁷ See FRYER 2020.

The Erica López Prater case – whiney intellectual censorship

In the Fall semester of 2022 in her art history class at Hamline University (USA), Erica López had shown – but with preliminary notification to students and pre-course distribution of the syllabus – artful 14th century depictions of the Prophet Mohammed, as known from and permitted (also) in several Islamic traditions. One female Muslim student complained that such portrayal should not be done publicly and had ‘hurt’ her feelings and cultural identity. López was subsequently vilified⁴⁸ and eventually fired (no contract renewal). She was even accused by the university management of being ‘Islamophobic’ – a comment they later retracted (AAUP 2023: 6). This is a typical contemporary case of a university administration thoughtlessly giving in to ill-motivated, subjective complaints of a student ‘feeling hurt’, with the administration thereby betraying academic education and freedom⁴⁹: as part of their academic education, students *must* be confronted with different viewpoints, and in this case the idea of a justified feeling of insult was also refuted by other Muslims, who disagreed with the complaining young student. A massive groundswell of support for López emerged, and indeed included Muslim scholars, and she started a court case against Hamline University. The university administration was met with objections from the scholarly community with evidence and nuance (see, *e.g.*, AAUP 2023), and Hamline faculty eventually voted (71 to 12) in favour of the university president stepping down due to her handling of the case. But the university management could not stand criticism and responded with denial, defending its anti-science attitude by denying the long tradition in art history debate *and* Muslim discourse on depictions of the Prophet Muhammad in manuscripts. The administration just bypassed these traditions (the first one academic) and thus did not care to uphold the Western *telos*. Dr. López Prater meanwhile found another job, while the court case (in mid-2024) was still pending.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ See QUINN, Ryan. *Report: Adjunct who showed images of prophet was ‘vilified’*. [online]. Inside HigherEd, 2023 [cit. 19. 10. 2023]. Available from: www.insidehighered.com/news/faculty-issues/academic-freedom/2023/05/22/report-adjunct-who-showed-images-prophet-was.

⁴⁹ BERLINERBLAU, Jacques. *Hamline University’s free speech controversy shows the collapse of the professoriate*. [online], MSNBC.com blog, 14 January 2023 [cit. 22. 2. 2023]. Available from: www.msnbc.com/opinion/msnbc-opinion/hamline-professor-hamin-prophet-muhammad-rcna64949.

⁵⁰ As this paper was going to press, it was announced that the University of Minnesota settled the case with Dr. López (under unknown conditions): see BILGER, Micaiah. *Art scholar settles lawsuit after losing job for showing image of Prophet Muhammad*. [online] The College Fix, 2024 [cit. 5. 9. 2024]. Available from: www.thecollegefix.com/art-scholar-settles-lawsuit-after-losing-job-for-showing-image-of-prophet-muhammad/.

Reason and rationalism

The three cases briefly outlined above show that rationality and reasonableness can quickly get lost if the institutional environment meant to foster critical fact-finding and debate on betrays its own principles, for instance because of a certain 'business model' –catering to and pleasing students, as paying customers of the university.

The creeping assault on some basics of science, as evident in the three above cases, tending to replace the quest for truth(s), as a general regulative mission (at the origins of science),⁵¹ with concerns of an ideological nature, is one of the most discussed and headline-making developments in Western academia today. The response by many mainstream academics has been to just focus on their own work and hope reason will win out. But that is not guaranteed. Indeed, the anti-academic contestation and protest or what some even call 'cancel culture'⁵² are seeping into the mainstream, and this is a challenge⁵³ and a disturbance to deal with. A flight into more professional studies for a small audience, or into aestheticism, is fine but will not confront the challenges. The number of worrying cases of academic colleagues declared as 'beyond the pale' or even 'cancelled' or prevented from tenure is now too large to ignore, and in this respect the baneful influence of American academia on the rest of the world is to be confronted and taken seriously.

At the same time, the critical moment that now animates academia – i.e., the focus on inclusion, diversity, correction of biased recruitment, 'social justice' concerns and grievances/reparation – should not be denigrated. Everything is criticisable, including mainstream science and many of its automatisms and assumptions. But all claims, even if motivated by non-scientific intuitions and positions, should be studied, and addressed and tested/evaluated based on the facts, the evidence, and reasoning; not by personal 'witnessing' or ideological preference as a determining source of reliable data or persuasive argument. In science, the 'argument situation' is *default*, be it in the natural, life or social sciences. Yet not all assumptions and statements – however criticisable – will and can be refuted; many will indeed be corroborated – and show considerable resilience to critique, such as Darwin's idea of evolution. What survives after critique is (for the time being) acceptable, as our best

⁵¹ Here the pioneering work by Galileo (1564-1642), at the dawn of the scientific era, might perhaps provide the best example; notably his great 1632 book *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems—Ptolemaic and Copernican*.

⁵² cf. SALZMAN 2021; BEN-PORATH 2023.

⁵³ KRYLOV & TANZMAN 2023. These authors provide a catalogue of how far the madness in scientific censoring (note: in chemistry) has gone.

knowledge at time T^1 . In this process, the pursuit of ‘truth’ – as a regulative idea⁵⁴ – remains as important as ever.

In view of today’s epistemological contestation and the disarray caused by, *inter alia*, ‘decoloniality’ critiques and what some people refer to as ‘wokeness’: is science under threat? We cannot open a social science or humanities journal without encountering at least one paper using such concepts and questioning mainstream science – a tendency which begins to also engulf STEM fields, with even *Nature* editorials⁵⁵ occasionally tuning in to what many see as fashionable diversity and inclusivity discourse. In fact, decoloniality discourses and related critiques are even tending to become ‘mainstream’ in certain domains, notably in the USA. This is seen in job recruitment strategies –where DEI criteria sometimes are weighed heavier than professional qualifications. Threats to what were thought to be unassailable principles (*e.g.*, disciplinary qualifications, critical sense, balance, merit-based assessment) are serious⁵⁶. So there are no doubt dangers to free, scientific thinking and the critical quest for truth.⁵⁷ Authors like Lukianoff and Haidt⁵⁸ explain this primarily in terms of social-psychological and cultural problems in modern (USA) society.⁵⁹ They are probably right, but there is a real need to recognise and understand the underlying *sociological* and *institutional* processes as well.

Generational and institutional issues impacting scientific praxis

The debate continues on *why* academia is showing signs of derailment in its scientific *telos*, of over-concentration on so-called ‘social justice’ issues, on the possible ‘hurting’ of students, and on censoring and excluding of certain academics because of different or ‘deviant’ views that are beyond current political orthodoxies.

Apart from ignorance which almost always plays its part, there are at least two processes at work: a) the growing numbers and diversity of the student body and its

⁵⁴ cf. JARVIE 2001, p. 560.

⁵⁵ See the well-meaning 2022 editorial “Perils for Science in Democracies and Authoritarian Countries”, *Nature Human Behaviour* 6, 1029–1031. [online] Available from: www.nature.com/articles/s41562-022-01443-2. See also: WEINGARD, Bo. The fall of ‘Nature’. [online] Quillette, 2023 [cit. 9. 1. 2023] Available from: <https://quillette.com/2022/08/28/the-fall-of-nature/>. Compare also: ARNOLD, Carrie. The sting of sizeism in the scientific workplace. [online] *Nature*, 2022 [cit. 17. 02. 2023]. Available from: www.nature.com/articles/d41586-022-01536-y.

⁵⁶ cf. ABBOT, *et al.* 2023.

⁵⁷ cf. Mac DONALD 2022; SAGE 2022; SOPHALKALYAN 2023. See also WAYNE, Randy. *The search for truth at Cornell University* [online] Substack.com, 2023 [cit. 5. 6. 2023]. Available from: <https://hxstem.substack.com/p/the-search-for-truth-at-cornell-university>.

⁵⁸ LUKIANOFF and HAIDT 2015.

⁵⁹ See also J. Haidt’s article in *The Atlantic* (2022).

generational dissent towards established higher education structures (as any generation does, in its own way), and b) the ever-increasing commercialisation of today's universities, notably in the USA, but also expanding globally.

First the generational issue. Students are animated by the issues of the day circulating in the public sphere, and these currently are multicultural diversity, inequality, social justice and of late issues of gender identity, often in inchoate forms.⁶⁰ In curricula, universities have catered to such presumed students' interests and sensitivities. They have offered courses that address such issues – often selectively – but that also often teach students how to reason as 'victims' and confirm them in their own notions, rather than help them develop and do new, disinterested, open-minded research, which academia is supposed to cultivate.⁶¹

We also must be open to the idea that many students may not (yet) entirely know what they are talking about, standing only at the beginning of a learning curve (I recall my own student days). A relative lack of knowledge and judgement is not to be condemned, but many are not familiar yet with the scientific ethos and procedures and their history. Often, ideological notions (as motives) and a politics of 'feeling' are followed, and their contributions to academic debate are often less compelling. The often-heard demand by students to be 'safe' and have 'safe spaces' is sometimes justified, but it can also be a demand to be 'spared' from arguments and views different from their own – which is the opposite of an academic education.

This sociological phenomenon of a rebelling generation busy with social ideologies and social media-propelled, self-centred views, may be characteristic of the current conjuncture in 'late' industrial-capitalist-societies. But the principles and canons of sound, criticisable and productive science mentioned above – empirical, evidence-based research, critical methods not dictated by moral/ideological preoccupations, holding all statements/claims open to criticism – remain the same and will ultimately survive the onslaught by its opponents. This will not occur without sustained efforts at corrective debate, new policy and action. The Leftist and Rightist critiques may ultimately be *absorbed*⁶² or transformed by the basic principles and demands of critical science, led by rationalist and critical-pragmatist procedures to continually test and advance plausible knowledge claims.

⁶⁰ And remarkably, since the 7 Oct. 2023 Hamas terror attacks, overshadowed by anti-Israel and anti-Semitic agitation.

⁶¹ Lloyd (2023) describes this experience in a particularly shocking account.

⁶² See Brooks's (2021) optimistic argument on the 'woke' section of the critical movement.

The second and decisive issue is that of university management. The strongly business-like running of universities today has led to a creeping reformulation of their *telos*: not primarily an open-minded, diverse, critical institution of learning and research dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and truth, but a place that ‘has to’ attract and keep as many paying students as possible – students who are *customers* and must be ‘served’ in producing degrees a.s.a.p. Generally speaking, this has led to a watering down of the idea of curiosity-driven, evidence-based, and confrontational science (i.e., serious debate and exchange of ideas of all kinds). University managers are prepared to go far here. The number of cases of faculty members forced to ‘conform’, apologise or resign in cases of so-called insensitive or ‘politically incorrect’ teaching or research now runs into the hundreds.⁶³ Rarely were they accused of violating the canons of proper scientific research itself. Here we see a neglect among university managers of their responsibility to stimulate good science and solid academic education of today’s students, in favour of material incentives: getting as many students as possible and ‘marketing’ their institution. This depressing let-down of science and truth-seeking in science by many university managers is the most troublesome issue to address, more than the generational criticisms alluded to above. The Erika López Prater case illustrates this well. It also recalls the Peter Boghossian case at Portland State University⁶⁴. There *is* a certain backlash emerging, e.g., via the American Association of University Professors, the ‘Heterodox Academy’ and the National Association of Scholars, and by numerous individual scientists⁶⁵. But a general reform of the institutional setting of Western (notably US) university management is crucial for the overall regeneration of science and of the Western *telos*. While the commercially fuelled managerial misery in US and other Western higher education institutions has been diagnosed many times, reform, especially in the rich private universities, is slow.

⁶³ A recent unsettling example was that of Prof. Kathleen Stock, at Sussex University in the UK. See HAYTON, Debbie, *Kathleen Stock and the rejection of reality*. [online]. The Spectator, 2021 [cit. 5.8.2022]. Available from: www.spectator.co.uk/article/kathleen-stock-and-the-debate-over-gender-reality/. And: SULLIVAN, Rory. *Sussex University Professor Kathleen Stock resigns after transgender rights row*. [online]. The Independent, 2021 [cited 18.6.2023]. Available from: www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/professor-kathleen-stock-quits-university-gender-identity-b1947387.html; www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/kathleen-stock-transphobia-university-austin-b1954486.html. See also footnote 77 below.

⁶⁴ BOGHOSSIAN 2022.

⁶⁵ See also FRIEDERSDORF 2023; WAYNE 2023.

Returning to science and debate as non-justificationist critical discourse

The 'Western' scientific *telos* – or rather, the *telos* of scientific practice anywhere – must be restored. To do so, it first has to be *understood*. That is less and less the case among (undergraduate) students and among university administrators – for different reasons.

I repeat that the *telos* is a product, not a self-evident aim of any civilisational tradition, the West included. Humans indeed may not have evolved at all for 'rational thought'⁶⁶, but more as pragmatic, survival-oriented beings. A rationalist *telos* is a self-declared, regulative idea, evolved in a particular moment in history, but one that now works best, in a world dependent on science, engineering and evidence-based progress. It is aware of the context factors impinging on scientific practice but does not yield to relativist epistemology, which is morally and logically highly problematic.

As I have suggested above, it is worthwhile to re-emphasise a pancritical rationalist perspective as the epistemological basis for scientific research. Following Bartley⁶⁷ we hereby appeal to a non-justificationist perspective that rejects the authoritarian metaphysics that underlies so much of Western philosophy and science. Evidence-based research and rational argument – especially needed in social science⁶⁸ – recognise that all assertions are and can be held open to criticism without 'justifying' them with an appeal to an external authority or motives. Nothing in logic, which we use to argue and assess, prevents us from doing so.⁶⁹

Science on the basis of critical, rationalist methods and procedures is not flawless and immune to abuse⁷⁰, but its self-correcting potential should be radically reinforced: to allow multiple testing and critique, allow more inclusion and diversity of approaches and viewpoints, not only based on gender, marginalised or 'race' criteria but also on ethical and political orientations, provided that the ideas, hypotheses and results are held open to criticism on rational grounds, i.e., can be examined and refuted (if need be) with evidence and logic. Otherwise, it is one subjective view against another. That science in this sense is 'doubted' and 'distrusted' is only good: "Science deserves to be trusted in so far as it is based on a

⁶⁶ cf. MARX 2017.

⁶⁷ BARTLEY 1984.

⁶⁸ cf. LITTLE 1995.

⁶⁹ BARTLEY 1980, p. 76-77. I here skip the entire debate on the Popper-Bartley controversy, as this is explored in detail by ARTIGAS (1999).

⁷⁰ cf. JARVIE 2001, pleading for democratic control.

rigorous distrust of itself”⁷¹. If, as alluded to above, the institutional environment and the societal regimes and pressure inhibit science from exercising its self-correcting practices and thus override its truth and knowledge claims by economic, political, or ideological interests, trouble is in store. We live in an era where ‘truth’ is again under threat or denied by politicians and ideologues, but as Lee McIntyre said⁷², in his great study of contemporary denials of the value of seeking truth by efforts to politically subordinate reality: “Truth still matters, as it always has”. It is a sign of the times that this elementary idea even must be re-emphasised today.

Toward renewal of the telos

Stokes (2009) was right: we need to renew the *telos*. It is in fact not only ‘Western’ but shared by all those interested in sound science and critical academic debate. Scientific progress – evidence-based, critical exploration of the nature and state of the cosmos, nature and humans via trial and error – is possible and largely obvious, as can be seen and traced across centuries.⁷³ Although the idea that science is a fully ‘rational’ undertaking is incorrect, its impact has been tremendous, with humans having even been ‘too successful’: science and (economically instrumentalised) rationality have begun to work against us (environmental destruction, climate change, social media intimidation, certain AI applications) and – ironically – need reflexive, scientific-rational correction⁷⁴. But, as noted, science, as a quest for valid, corroborated knowledge, never gives us total ‘proof’ or certainty – all is open to correction or refutation.

James Maxwell’s quote from the beginning of the paper may incite hope – from nothing *may* come something – but there is also reason to doubt whether those in the camp of the Western *telos* have the will or ability to take such steps if they undermine argument and debate. Further debate and dialogue – without precondition and without condescension – is critically needed but is only possible when higher education institutions and their management are reoriented – away from fads and ideological preoccupations as agenda-setting, and back to the institutionally grounded basics of free, ethical, open-ended, critical methods of research and debate geared to finding the best possible knowledge consensus. This may sound utopian, but there is no alternative, and without this procedural basis, scientific

⁷¹ CHMIELEWSKI 2022, p. 1686.

⁷² McINTYRE 2018, p. 172.

⁷³ Of course, not necessarily meaning human or moral progress.

⁷⁴ cf. WAGENMAKERS 2023.

activity would lose its significance. One cannot advance scientific research and university education without institutionally recognising and protecting the value of debate, (dis)agreement and critical exchange. To restore the diversity of views and of free inquiry and academic culture, more is needed than good-natured calls to reason such as for example voiced by Ben-Porath⁷⁵. Needed are serious institutional reform, more courageous personnel in defending free, rationality-based inquiry, de-emphasising the commercialisation of higher education, tempering of non-scientific (ideological) demands upon the practice of research and of 'oaths of loyalty' placed upon staff and newly hired faculty, more 'adversarial' research projects⁷⁶, and public action to defend evidence-based, critical scientific research and policy. Backlash to the attacks on non-ideological, primary evidence-based research has been emerging⁷⁷ and likely it will grow stronger, with a chance of science eventually 'absorbing' the criticisms⁷⁸. An awareness of the potential of a pancritical rationalist approach (see above) can help here.

A final note on the current state of play in Western (social) science: the earlier cited paper by Abbot *et al.*⁷⁹, entitled 'In defence of merit in science', was *refused* publication in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)* in the USA.⁸⁰ As this was an excellent paper making basic points about evidence-based science and about the standards of judging work on results regardless of authors' personal backgrounds, this suggests hypocrisy: the editors of this prestigious journal generally accept only papers that show the highest merit in their subfields. But they deny acknowledging the principle when it is explicitly and eloquently defended in an ethical and epistemologically sound manner. This, to some, looks like worrying institutional cowardice and fear of what some call the 'woke crowd'⁸¹, and may illustrate a corrosion of Western higher education establishments, which thereby needlessly subvert the Western *telos*. The above analysis also made clear again that this is not only a 'Western' *telos* but a general, transcultural one – that is, if one assumes the value of informed, fact-oriented and critical-deliberative research endeavours in the public domain. If 'identity-political' agendas and the business model of journal publishing override the solid and critical

⁷⁵ BEN-PORATH 2023.

⁷⁶ cf. STANOVICH 2021; CECI, KAHN and WILLIAMS 2023.

⁷⁷ See: HARDMAN, Robert. As trans activists were booed and hauled out of Kathleen Stock's university appearance last night, ROBERT HARDMAN recounts how cancel culture was cancelled in Oxford. [online] *Daily Mail*, 2023 [cited. 10. 2. 2024]. Available from: www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12141319/ROBERT-HARDMAN-recounts-cancel-culture-cancelled-Oxford.html?ico=topics_pagination_desktop..

⁷⁸ BROOKS 2021

⁷⁹ ABBOT *et al.* 2023.

⁸⁰ It appeared in the *Journal of Controversial Ideas*, although the merit idea is not so controversial at all.

⁸¹ cf. SAGE 2022.

evaluation of serious scientific papers then something seems wrong. Institutional courage and national policy to correct this therefore seem urgently needed, so that the pancritical attitude can flourish: excluding no one, but critically testing *all* (knowledge) claims.

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