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Enchantment vs Scientism in Contemporary Culture: A Reply to Mark Erickson

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In these days of the COVID-19 pandemic it makes sense to recall Max Weber, who died from an epidemic virus 100 years ago, in order both to reflect on the practical value of scientific methods and the possibility of science to serve us, at least as a weak shield from various troubles, and to try in our isolation to “escape from the conceptual framework we are socialised into” (Erickson 2020, 22).

In my recent article (2020) in the special issue on 100 Years of Max Weber’s “Science as a Vocation,” I examined the problems of the philosophy of engineering, which are largely related to the problem of determining its protagonist—an engineer. Professor Erickson agreed with me that to fix definitional problems regarding “engineer” is not easy. He notes that the problem of preoccupation with definitions does not lie in any particular area, but is fundamental to science: “... the issue of why it is that we *do* have dominant definitions in our culture needs to be addressed. Our technoscientific world, where many formal discourses are dominated by scientism, conflates science, technology and engineering in such a way that these expand to become a bigger object than the sum of their parts” (21).

Raising the issue of why it is that we *do* have dominant definitions in our culture, Erickson advises that we are “to take a step further and to immerse ourselves in a different worldview, that of a polytheistic world which does not require us to impose inappropriate and artificial conceptual schemes onto the objects of inquiry we address” (22). In search of this different worldview, Erickson has moved along the course set by Feyerabend and reaches back to the world of archaic ancient Greece and the pre-Presocratics, in an article where, with the aid of Homer, he interrupts the West’s long narrative that places theory above experience (Erickson 2018).

Should Dominant Definitions be any More Useful?

In the modern world, a criticism of existing dogmas that block the path to new unexplored worlds is becoming a primary discourse. Creative aspirations penetrate all spheres of symbolic being. The creative destruction theory of Joseph Schumpeter, who introduced innovation as a key factor in economic development, can be freely compared with the methodological anarchism of Paul Feyerabend in the field of scientific development. We may also recall Richard Florida’s theory of the creative class, arguing that the path toward creativity is institutional and that the destruction of dogmas has itself become a new dogma. Thus the question as to whether dominant definitions are useful is quite relevant.

Relying on Feyerabend, Professor Erickson suggests that a rejection of the priority of strictly scientific methods in favor of methodological pluralism, which includes an appeal to irrational and mythical ideas, could allow us “to challenge our current conceptual worldview as well as open up possibilities for other forms of knowledge long-discarded as ‘myth’ or even ‘madness’ to re-enter our analyses and converse with on equal terms” (2018, 139).

Paul Feyerabend is known for his skepticism toward science. He understands it as primarily an authoritarian ideology that owes its best results to the extrascientific methods that it supplanted into marginality. Of course, there can be many readings of Feyerabend. First, I

would note (as my students have noticed) that by legitimizing extrascientific irrational methods in science, Feyerabend himself remains within the framework of exclusively rational argumentation. Second, arguing that science in the 20th century became an ideology and proposing that schools teach magic and alchemy along with physics and chemistry, Feyerabend apparently adds to his objections the hope that without being “imposed” by the system, science might become a voluntary choice (which can be described as a rational choice). Feyerabend believes that a mature citizen is one who has learned to develop and enrich his or her thinking, and then decides on what seems to him or her most suitable (1975). Reading Feyerabend, I think not only about his genuine commitment to rational argumentation, but also that the mythology and magic, which he fervently defended, clearly reveal themselves in culture again, wearing new clothes.

Disenchantment and Enchantment in Contemporary Science

I agree with Erickson when he talks about science: “Put simply, the more we know about science and the more science we have, the less we feel we understand it” (2018, 128). It is not surprising that in such a situation we cling to reliable definitions and conceptual distinctions hoping to find some support in them. While I do not hold this support to be credible, nor do I see a position from which rational methods are unequivocally unproductive.

However, we can find support in the past, in the golden age of thought in the polytheistic world, which does not cast a grid of abstract schemes and definitions on ours. It is probably only in our time that people have managed to come close to understanding particular moments in the history of ideas that have led to developments science as well as the conflicts endured by their agents. And it is probably only in our time that we cannot deny ourselves the pleasure of plunging into the world of thoughts and experiences of those that preceded us, whether it be Homer, Plato or the creators of the Modern. This historical journey into the life of ideas and people gives us genuine existential delight, but is this pleasure accompanied by the development of effective tools for breakthrough ideas in science or for understanding the principles upon which science operates? Perhaps it is accompanied by interesting points along the way, but not destinations of a historical voyage.

These days I suppose only a group of naturalist fanatics would deny the role of irrational ideas in the historical development of science. However, I want to draw attention to the fact that our culture, including modern science, most likely did not go through the procedure of the famous Weberian “disenchantment.” In general, I consider disenchantment as one of the most relevant and interesting concepts, as many modern studies show.

For a more reasoned development of my thought I want to turn to the work *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Josephson-Storm 2017). Josephson-Storm believes that the “myth of disenchantment” is often taken literally and that it emerged as a trope to separate modernity from medieval mystical Europe. Josephson-Storm tends to see Weber’s expression “disenchanting of the world” as an expression of pessimism. The main characters of new European science Bruno, Newton, Bacon, Descartes were all to some extent involved in magic, and the scientists who followed them (including Weber) do not lose this curiosity for the irrational. Weber, as Josephson-Storm reveals, “creates the myth of the world’s spell in the center of the occult renaissance” (2017, 270).

For Josephson-Storm, Weber is not a dry rational theorist of modernization, he focuses on Weber's frequent vacations at the Monte Verita in Ascona, Switzerland, which served as the headquarters of the Hermetic Brotherhood of Light, a fraternity devoted to practical magic, clairvoyance, and astral projection. Josephson-Storm comes to the rather paradoxical conclusion that the modern mythologeme of alienation from magic—"the disenchanting of the world"—probably came into being from an excess of witchcraft, and not from its absence" (2017, 269-270).

Michael T. Saler (2004) agrees with Josephson-Storm that Weberian disenchantment refers primarily to disappointment with the world:

Weber's phrases captured the temper of his time: by the late nineteenth century the association between modernity and disenchantment was a common trope in Western Europe and America. The negative effects of industrialization, urbanization, mass politics, and mass culture were widely discussed by intellectuals, and the triumph of scientific naturalism in the wake of Darwin's theory of evolution seemed to rule out any divine purpose or legible meaning to existence (138).

I would briefly conclude that our culture is unlikely to lose interest in occult theories and practices despite the proclaimed scientism. Twenty-first century readings of Weberian disenchantment reflect, most likely, social and political disappointment and a certain pessimism, but not a loss of lively interest in mysticism. At the same time, rational methods and the desire for precise definitions, in my opinion, have somewhat lost their persuasiveness, largely due to the modern culture of "creativity." Nevertheless, some "unfashionableness" does not deprive rational approaches of objective significance and cognitive value. Of course, science in the 21st century is incredibly aware of the non-determinism, randomness, and uncertainty of the world. Yet, I would hold that this more likely suggests that we deal with rationality, accuracy and a conceptual apparatus at a different level.

In addition science, apparently, does not cease to be fed by the myths of the past and present in their most incredible mixture. It is impossible to ignore the fact that the term *enhancement* is used in modern scientific literature in the field of biotechnology. Enhancement is associated with strengthening and "improving" a human through science and technology as well as with her transition to another posthuman form. In frames of biological policy, "improvement" appears to be a less successful term compared to "enhancement," which contains implicitly attractive connotations.

In our age, with its main characteristic being the pluralism of worldviews, it is no longer possible, apparently, to say that one era replaced another. The era of disenchantment has not ended, Weberian theory remains relevant, but the era of enhancement offers all the possibilities for revanche.

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