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How to be An Inconvenient Scientist? A Reply to Berry Tholen

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Priests of Truth or Academic Citizens?

The scholar is destined in a peculiar manner for society: his class, more than any other, exists only through society and for society—it is thus his peculiar duty to cultivate the social talents,—an openness to receive, and a readiness to communicate knowledge,—in the first place and in the highest degree (Fichte 1847, 56).

For German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte, a scholar plays not one but three vital roles in society. As a “*teacher* of the human race” it is her duty to help people to “recognize truth” (57). As a *guide* she “has to teach them the wants arising out of the special condition in which they stand, *and* (emphasis added) to lead them to the appropriate means of reaching the peculiar objects which they are there called upon to attain” (57). Finally, since neither of these roles is compatible with the use of force or coercion, the scholar needs to be morally the best person of her age (59), thus leading by example.

However, as Fichte reminds his audience, the contributions of the scholar are not always cherished and speaking up can even put the scholars themselves at risk:

I am a Priest of Truth; I am in her pay; I have bound myself to do all things, to venture all things, to suffer all things for her. If I should be persecuted and hated for her sake, if I should even meet death in her service, what wonderful thing is it I shall have done (59-60).

Obviously, for proponents of German idealism, being a scholar is nothing for the faint hearted!

One and a half centuries later, in the beginning cold war era, C. Wright Mills paints a picture of (western capitalist) societies which are not all too enthusiastic about independent scholarly thought either. Mills was particularly suspicious of “power elites” whose influence depends on secrecy and the withholding of information from the public. Accordingly, for him, the duties to “demand full information of relevance to human destiny and the end of decisions made in irresponsible secrecy” and to “cease being the intellectual dupes of political patrioteers” both feature prominently on his list of “Master Tasks for Intellectuals” (Mills 2008).

I came to think about these two examples when I read Berry Tholen’s “How to be a Responsible Scientist” (2020). I found his summary of why and how Alasdair MacIntyre’s concept of “virtue ethics” could provide a sound ethical foundation for the Weberian understanding of the social role of the scholar thought provoking. Not so much because it offers an original addition to the debate about the meaning and relevance of Weber’s work (I think it does), but rather because of some remarks he makes on the last pages of his articles: *En passant* he calls, for the re-politicization of the individual scientists *as an academic citizen*. Although I’m not sure whether he envisions the restitution of the priests of truths, he seems to agree with Fichte that “an openness to receive, and a readiness to communicate

knowledge” is a key virtue of the scholar. He argues that the moral obligation to get involved and confront the public with uncomfortable knowledge is of paramount importance in times of looming “fact-free politics” (Tholen 2020, 1). Moreover, his focus on the ethical dimension of scholarly work is a welcome diversion to the sterile debate about the epistemological limitations of science or the role of science in (alleged) postmodern societies.

I therefore take his ethical approach as a mere starting point, but will focus on outlining some ideas to strengthen a sociological perspective. I’m particularly interested in the question of who could pass the academic citizenship test and how “access” to academic positions influences the ability and willingness of scholars to get involved. Drawing on Tholen’s depiction of science as a practice that is dependent on a delicate balance of external and internal goods I’m looking for social factors that could explain the reluctance of scientists and social scientists in particular to confront public with “uncomfortable facts”: Have the priests of truth turned into “slaves of the grant”? Is the apparent shortage of academic citizens an indicator for the moral failure of academics? Or is it a symptom for some pathologies in relation of scholars to the “external goods” of scientific practice?

If this is the case, we have to face some uncomfortable facts about the ability of scholars to confront us with uncomfortable facts.

Re-Politicizing Science or De-Politicization of the Scientist?

Contemporary debate about the social role of science and scientists, despite drawing on a variety of epistemological, sociological and political traditions seem to evolve around two central questions:

1. Do Scientists / Scholars “have” the facts?
2. Should scientific facts trump other forms of knowledge?

The first line of criticism which could roughly be described as the “postmodern criticism” states that scientists should stay clear of political debates or, at least, admit that scientific knowledge is not superior to other forms of knowledge.

As I have argued elsewhere (Ruser 2020), these questions, albeit of some interest within the community of STS researchers and philosophers of science, are of very limited relevance when it comes to understanding the perception of scientists and their social roles by non-scientist. I’d therefore like to “pre-emptively” defend Tholen against potential criticism of not exploring the consequences and implications of describing science as a “practice” (Tholen 2020, 7). I think he is right in taking the special role of scientific knowledge for granted and turning to the much more important, sociological question of how scholarly advice should relate to democratic decision making instead. He thus addresses a second line of criticism that focuses on the tension between equality in democratic societies and the privileged position that (might) stem from access to “superior” knowledge.

However, instead of decrying “technocratic tendencies”, he calls for *more* political involvement of scientist as *academic citizens*. For him the question is not so much *whether*, but *how* scholars should get involved. He criticized in particular the tendency to hide individual judgement and opinion behind anonymous label of research institutes and universities:

Concentrating the public expression of scientific knowledge in institutions leads to an unwarranted ‘de-politicization’ of scientists: it blocks their role as academic citizens. The tendency to relay all kinds of ethical judgments—varying from considering the ethical aspects of research designs to the possible consequences of research and its political impact—from individual scientists to boards and committees, therefore, needs to be reversed (Tholen 2020, 11).

What does it mean to be an academic citizen? The question is the more pressing as Tholen dismisses standard conceptions such as Roger Pielke Jr’s idea that scholars should adopt the role of “honest brokers”.

But what could possibly be wrong with scholars who engage “in decision-making by clarifying and, at times, seeking to expand the scope of choice available to decision makers” (Pielke Jr. 2007, 17)? Probably nothing when you conceive of scientists as experts who come in handy when public debate has reached a dead end and could benefit from the “injection” of fresh, scientific knowledge.

In other words, the honest broker knows *when* to step out of the laboratory or study:

Recently, scholars have argued that the approach scientists choose should depend on the level of public consensus on policy issues. Scientists should not take a critical stand when there is a broad consensus on policies and policy goals and they should act as brokers in contexts in which there is disagreement (Tholen 2020, 10).

Public consensus is obviously not a suitable yardstick for whether scientists should step in and challenge the very certainties on which such public consensus might rests. After all, some of the worst political regimes and some of the most outlandish superstitions were backed by large majorities and corresponded with widely shared beliefs. Likewise, it is highly problematic to depict the scholar as a disinterested referee who appears in time of disagreement to gently point to possible alternatives.

Tholen therefore prefers to assign scholars the role of the “gadfly” (Tholen 2020, 10), thus sharing Noberto Bobbio’s view that “[t]he task of the men of culture today is more to spread doubts than to recognize convictions” (Bobbio 1951 cited after Goncalves 2016, 23). As an academic citizen the scholar has to be inconvenient, annoying, constantly challenging consensus and convictions that people hold dear. The scholar should not be “of service” but has the moral obligation to be inconvenient and

[I]t is the scientist's particular responsibility to introduce in the public debate (and to the minds of politicians) the well founded but inconvenient knowledge to which he, as an expert, has privileged access. He has to find ways to confront citizens and policy-makers with facts and trigger them to re-evaluate their opinions (Tholen 2020, 10).

Slaves of the Grant? Who Passes the “Academic Citizenship Test”?

Wouldn't it be nice to have these engaged academic citizens, tirelessly working to dis-and uncover well-founded knowledge while always willing and eager to expose and confront false beliefs? It surely would. It would be a flattering depiction of the scholars (it unquestionably is for me) to cast themselves as brave defenders of truth and bold challengers of false consensus and shaky compromise.

And yet, despite the fact that scientists have found the courage to challenge consensus and trigger the re-evaluation of public opinion—one might think of climate scientists or virologists who are certainly spreading “inconvenient knowledge”—the very existence of Tholen's article indicates that academics not always live up to their civic and moral duty. But why is this the case? And what exactly are we dealing with? Are scientists really keeping their distance from politics by withholding inconvenient information? And if so, can a “moral suasion” change their minds?

I don't think so. Mainly because I'm not sure whether the presupposition holds. However, I believe that Tholen's instinct to draw on MacIntyre is promising to find an explanation for the reluctance to feeding in inconvenient knowledge into political and public debates.

Instead of focusing on the concept of virtue ethics I will take a closer look on his depiction of *science as a practice* though.

For MacIntyre “doing science”—like many other social activities can be understood as a “practice” that is, as an activity that aims at and is restricted by a delicate interplay of “external” and “internal goods”. Both types of goods can be means and ends to the respective practice. Academic activity for instance is *dependent* on certain external goods, such as institutions, legal frameworks, perhaps a certain social status, and not to forget, economic means. Likewise, academic careers can lead to the accumulation of external goods, for instance, fame or a decent income. Internal goods of the practice of science, such as the creativity of the research process or an appreciation for logical rigor—at least in theory—relate to the external goods inasmuch as the interplay of the accumulation of internal goods (being a good researcher) should correspond with the accumulation of external goods (e.g. having a safe position within the academic field).

As I have argued elsewhere (Ruser 2020) the scarcity of external goods and the resulting ever more fierce competition for safe positions has serious implications for the internal goods of the scientific practices. In particular the pressure to “conform” with the expectations of employers (e.g. Universities that seek to gain in the global competition for “elite status”)

funding organizations (with an interest in concrete, applicable results) but increasingly also academic peers can explain why modern scientists “themselves feel the need to point towards the “external” value of their work” (2020, 169). In particular social scientists seem to adopt their new role as contributors to the solution of real-world problems (170) rather than to cherish their responsibility to spread doubt that Noberto Bobbio envisioned for them.

The desire (or the necessity) to provide a useful service to society might seriously hamper the appetite of academic citizens to point out flaws in the public consensus, dominant views or even the latest zeitgeisty fashion.

For instance, what if you think that the central task of social sciences and humanities is *not* to integrate “the socio-economic dimension into the design, development and implementation of research itself, and of new technologies can help find solutions to societal issues”. You might reject the functionalist approach to social science or might even (perhaps falsely) follow Marcuse and read the above quote as an attempt to reaffirm an “objective order of things” and thus efficient exploitation of mental resources (Marcuse 1964, 147-8). How outspoken would your criticism be, knowing that the quote was taken from the European Commission’s website describing the role of the social sciences and humanities in the “Horizon 2020” programme?

Or take another example. Maybe you used the time in lockdown to read Richard Münch’s *Academic Capitalism* (2014) or Benjamin Ginsberg’s *The Fall of the Faculty* (2013). Becoming critical of the concept of the “entrepreneurial university” you continue research on this topic. What if your own findings confirm that this idea is indeed highly problematic? Well at least if you’re an employee of the Technical University in Munich, you’re findings would contradict the Universities own “mission” as stated on their website.

I don’t want to imply that scholars are silenced or generally remain subdued. The Technical University in Munich would most likely be fine with a critical article about the concept of the entrepreneurial university (and would most likely be very pleased if this research would lead to a paper published in a high impact journal). Likewise, the reviewers of a grant application would certainly not “punish” the applicant for criticizing, the wording, aims and scope of a program she or he is applying to. I’m not speaking of any form of intellectual censorship. But I wonder whether there’s a more subtle form of complicity. I worry that the “making” of academic careers increasingly involves to (deliberately or unwittingly) avoid controversial topics and in particularly discourages to question the relation between external and internal goods. Why would one “foul one’s own nest” to borrow Stanislav Andreski’s words from almost half a century ago (1972, 11)

Or perhaps it is better to ask why he obviously though he could and should foul his nest by inviting his readers to “go to conferences to observe how *academic callboys* (emphasis added)solicit the favours of the foundation moguls” (192-3).

The answer might be as obvious as it is troubling. At his time being “single-mindedly focused on who can get what, and how” (193) that is chasing external goods could be decried as a betrayal of scholarly vocation, although Andreski’s book surely was inconvenient to many of his contemporaries.

Some Uncomfortable Facts About Uncomfortable Facts

At any given moment, there is a sort of all pervading orthodoxy, a general tacit agreement not to discuss large and uncomfortable facts (George Orwell cited after Allen 2005, 1).

Where does this leaves us with Tholen’s justified demand for academic citizens to step up, be “gadflies”, challenge the status quo and bring uncomfortable facts to the public attention? I believe that the scarcity of external goods could lead to a subtle, even unconscious self-censorship. As Andreski has pointed out, the social sciences and humanities are particularly prone to encourage “strategic decisions”, for instance the selection of topics and “adaptation” to external demands deemed necessary for a successful academic career:

In the subjects concerned with human behaviour, where well founded standards of excellence hardly exist, nothing debars selection for positions of power without the slightest regard for intellectual quality. Where the prizes appetizing but the rules of the game are so vague that honest play hardly can be distinguished from cheating, it is not likely that the very idealists and the impractical seekers after truth will get to the top (1972, 192).

From Tholen’s ethical point of view this state might be lamentable but shouldn’t concern us too much since the “the person of virtue knows how to prevent the striving for external goods from dominating or even blocking the realization of the internal good.” (2020, 10). But what if the conditions under which we’re striving for external goods systematically disadvantage the person of virtue? What if the “impractical seekers of truth” are gradually but successively replaced by the practical and pragmatic seekers of positions of power? What if the delicate balance between external and internal goods is changed in a way that *other* virtues, for instance a more direct sense of obligation to serve the needs of their respecting “hosting society” thrive, thus forcing the acceptance that the “golden age of academic freedom is over” (Khan and Curry 2012)?

Even if this turns out to be an exaggeration it could imply some uncomfortable facts about the ability of academic citizens to produce and provide uncomfortable knowledge. The end of the golden age of academic freedom and subsequently the ability to challenge public beliefs and political consensus will not take the form is not the consequence of anti-scientific sentiment or political manoeuvres to silence or “ban” scientists who push uncomfortable facts. The bigger threat stems from self-censoring disguised as clever or “inevitable” career choices and more subtle forms of exclusion. There is no need to expel troublemakers, when the “impractical seekers after truth” somehow get lost on the way to the tenured position. Unable to secure funding in the competition for academic excellence their dropping-out

seems justified or at least justifiable if they fail to deliver the taxpayer “value for money” (Kahn and Curry 2012).

So perhaps the most uncomfortable fact is that the academic playing field is tilted against the responsible scientist. Tholen’s plea for an ethical base of scholarly involvement in public affairs raises the question whether we afford to go along with naïve “value for money” arguments. Perhaps it is time to find the courage to investigate and question what is valued, why and by whom. This in turn might imply that we should focus on training inconvenient scientist which requires “not only [...] training in doing proper research but [...] also [to] help individuals to become academic citizens” (Tholen 2020, 11).

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