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## **SPECIAL FEATURE: Postmodern science - a contradiction in terms**

*The ideal of scientific objectivity has been subverted — even in the world's most prestigious universities — by the pernicious and pervasive influence of postmodernism, laments scientist Dr Walter Starck.*

**Over recent decades a few widely publicised instances of scientific misconduct have occasioned much concern. All have involved fabrication or misrepresentation of data in the highly competitive big budget area of biomedical research.**

Remarkably, however, in some other areas of research, similar and often even more egregious breaches of scientific ethics have become such common practice as to pass without comment. In such areas the ideal of scientific objectivity has been abandoned for overt advocacy, with cherry-picking, misrepresentation and suppression of data becoming near normal.

Moreover, any attempt to question such claims is met not with reasoned argument but appeals to authority, claims of expert consensus and personal denigration. How this gross departure from what were once core scientific values deserves consideration.

### **Logical**

The scientific method has been the most effective means yet developed to understand our world. It has resulted in longer, healthier, safer, more interesting and comfortable human lives than ever before. Essential to this success has been a philosophical approach in which understanding is evidence-based, logically consistent and subject to revision in the light of new evidence or more comprehensive explanation.

In science the highest goal has been a pursuit of truth as determined by reason and empirical evidence. Disregard for truth and false evidence are unacceptable for any reason.

The history of science has been an ongoing account of the discovery of previously unthinkable new understandings of the world and the abandonment of previously accepted ones. A heliocentric solar system, a multimillion-year-old Earth, evolution, continental drift, relativity, quantum theory — every new perception that challenges established belief always meets strong resistance regardless of the weight of reason and evidence to support it. The core strength of science is that it fosters such challenges and demands their acceptance if they cannot be refuted.

Whether or not one approves of all its findings, the success and authority of science are difficult to deny. Attempts to adopt its methodology and lay some claim to its authority have been made with varying success in other fields of study. In the humanities and so-called

social sciences the result has been decidedly mixed. Part of the difficulty has been the inherent complexity of the subject matter, but the conflict between unavoidable conclusions from evidence-based analysis and deeply held beliefs has also been a major obstacle. Too much in careers, reputations and convictions rests on foundations inconsistent with empirical evidence to permit easy acceptance of fundamentally different ideas.

Increasingly, however, the findings of science have begun to impinge upon the established order in the humanities. Postmodernism has been in large part a response to this challenge. It ignores the irrefutable success of science in permitting us to better understand our world; it rejects its authority as being simply a cultural artefact, no more or less valid than any other belief. Truth, facts, reason and objectivity are rejected because in practice the aim does not fully achieve the ideal.

Uncomfortable scientific findings are then "deconstructed" so as to dismiss or reinterpret them as desired. Into the vacuum of ethics and meaning it seeks to fill, this nihilistic pseudo-philosophy then inserts its own agenda, a new edition of the old leftist catechism re-branded as a form of moral righteousness we recognise as political correctness.

Postmodernism is now as predominant in academia as the socialism it has replaced. Although the latter attracted many scientists, their professional activity had limited relevance to social concerns and there was little direct influence on the practice of science itself.

Postmodernism, however, recognises the increasing influence of science on social issues and has attacked, co-opted and subverted it with considerable success. This has been made easier by the absence of any formal study of logic or the philosophy of science as a part of scientific training.

### **Ethics of science**

Awareness of the philosophy and ethics of science is something scientists are simply assumed to absorb from their environment, although these are matters which seldom arise in the normal course of events. Although a PhD purports to be a doctor of philosophy, most holders of the degree are in fact advanced technicians with highly specialised training, and with neither the breadth of scientific understanding nor philosophical knowledge the degree implies.

On the other hand, various issues of political correctness are virtually daily fare in the broader academic environment of which scientists are a part. Although few scientists might consider themselves as politically correct or (heaven forbid!) postmodern-ists, many, perhaps most, do subscribe to the prevailing attitudes of an academic community heavily influenced by this view.

Postmodernism has focused its concern and had its greatest effect on those areas of science which bear most strongly on societal matters. Behavioural and environmental studies have been notably influenced.

Such influence has taken manifold forms. A common one has seen many scientists abandon any attempt at an objective search for truth in favour of outright advocacy, in which evidence is misrepresented, ignored and suppressed to accord with some objective deemed to be socially or environmentally correct.

Regardless of the fact that dishonest scientific claims are often the basis for laws and restrictions that wreak havoc on people's lives, or even criminalise otherwise harmless activity, perpetrators of such dishonesty are seldom held responsible for any harm they cause. Ironically, incorporating similar misinformation in support of a public share offering would make one subject to criminal prosecution.

In environmental matters, dishonest scientific claims have become so widely practised and accepted that questioning or exposing them is the only thing now treated as a breach of ethics!

The penalties start with personal attack and denigration. For those in business it often includes severe legal and regulatory harassment. For researchers it can entail withdrawal of research support, publishing rejections, shunning by peers and even dismissal from employment. Such threats are very real and examples are common enough to deter all but the most determined or reckless.



***Lawrence Summers after Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences passed a no-confidence vote against him.***

### **Pernicious**

Two examples — one specific, the other general — clearly illustrate the pernicious and pervasive influence of postmodernism on science. Harvard University is one of the world's most prestigious academic and research institutions. Last year its president, economist Lawrence ("Larry") Summers, gave a conference address entitled "Diversifying the science and engineering workforce: women, underrepresented minorities, and their S&E careers in

Massachusetts".

In it he considered that social attitudes and discrimination might not be the sole reason for under-representation but that family vs. career choices and innate aptitudes might also be involved. He referred to indicative evidence and suggested that further research and a more objective approach could be useful.

His overall tone was moderate, unassertive and reasonable. By any normal standards of discourse he offered only a modest suggestion. However, the mere suggestion of any possibility of innate differences in aptitude between genders provoked a storm of protest. Those from aggressive women's activists groups might not be too surprising, but a threatened vote of no confidence by Harvard's powerful Faculty of Arts and Sciences led to his forced resignation.

Although he retained the support of many faculty students — with even an apparent majority among other faculties — it seems ironic it was the science community that demanded his head. In subscribing to irrational belief it seems that recent converts must always compete to demonstrate their commitment. As to the outcome, one can reasonably assume his replacement will not be likely to again suggest a rational scientific approach to such issues.

At the time of this writing, a brilliant young theoretical physicist at Harvard, Lubos Motl, has reportedly had his position terminated as a consequence of his outspoken support for Larry Summers and for his criticism of discrepancies between the claims of global-warming alarmists and the fundamental radiative physics involved. With this happening to the brightest at the best institutions, one can hardly expect better elsewhere.

A more general and closer-to-home example of postmodernist thinking involves the management of Australian fisheries. Australia has the largest fishery-zone per capita, yet the lowest harvest-rate in the world. The latter is only 1/30 of the average rate. The total catch is only half that of New Zealand and very close to that of PNG, Italy, Poland and Portugal.

Much of our fishery zone is in fact not fished at all. Despite this indisputable reality, our resource managers claim our fisheries are widely threatened with over-fishing and the world's most restrictive and costly management has been imposed. For the Commonwealth-licensed fishing fleet, annual management costs are in excess of \$100,000 per vessel.

The result of such (mis)management is a rapidly declining industry and rising imports. Seventy per cent of domestic seafood consumption now comes from imports. All these come from areas much more heavily fished than our own. Thailand is the largest supplier. It produces 11 times our total catch and from a fishing zone only 1/20 as large.

The cost of seafood imports is currently \$1.8 billion annually, and a CSIRO study projects a 400 per cent increase in consumption by 2020. To make matters worse, prices are increasing steeply with Asia's growing wealth and demand.

In effect, we are selling off non-renewable mineral resources to buy a renewable resource we have in abundance but which, thanks to mismanagement, we cannot harvest. In a superb example of bureau-speak, this is then touted as "sustainable management". To top it off, those responsible for this travesty of management have proclaimed the result to be the "best-managed fisheries in the world".

Bureaucratic empire-building, research promotion, media sensationalism, environmentalist ideology and political pandering have all played a role in this situation, but postmodern thinking has greatly facilitated it by sanctioning the abandonment of truth and evidence in favour of advocacy for the higher purpose of protecting our precious environment.

Although the bureaucrats, researchers, journalists, activists and politicians involved all have their own agendas, they share a common tertiary academic background wherein postmodern ethical influence prevails. This makes advocacy in accord with perceived political correctness a virtue, and disagreement politically incorrect. The more irrefutable any conflicting evidence presented, the greater the righteousness in its rejection.

With the collapse of socialism, disapproval of existing society has regrouped around the environment, but the agenda of restructuring society by coercion remains the same. The purported concern has simply shifted from downtrodden workers to the birds and bees. This accords well with the neo-pagan romanticism of nature popular among an overwhelmingly urbanised middle-class disconnected from the realities of the productive activity which supports them.

Societal disconnection from reality is a recurrent theme in human history. It may be imposed or may emerge when good fortune lasts long enough for people to begin to accept it as a given and even their just due.

Such delusions may sometimes be corrected if a leader is daring enough to state the obvious, and or may be abandoned *en masse*, as happened with the collapse of communism.

More often they self-correct by consequences resulting in disaster. With a chronic trade deficit, foreign debt growing at twice the rate of the economy, declining manufacturing and a looming global fuel shortage, Australia appears headed for a severe economic readjustment, but our delusions prevent us from doing anything or even recognising the situation.

A new, more holistic and realistic view of human ecology is overdue. Also needed is a leader who will dare to challenge the orthodoxy of environmental correctness. Hopefully, this will occur before the consequences of self-inflicted economic, energy and environmental impediments impose their own harsh corrections.

— **Dr Walter Starck is a marine scientist with 50 years' worldwide experience in reef biology.**