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The Threat of Irrationalism

John McLaren

Although Roger Sandall is right to worry about the threat of irrationalism, he is wrong to attribute it either to the left or to the arts and humanities. The issue is far more complex. Many on the left have, over the years, been attracted to ideologies that, in the name of subjecting every part of life to pure reason, have produced totalitarianism. The far right has been notoriously devoted to brutal irrationalisms of race and blood.

For more than 200 years, the major conflict among western intellectuals has not been between the arts and science, but between a rationalism that would exclude the function of imagination and the romantics who exclude the role of reason. Yet, Coleridge and Newman pointed out in the last century, and Popper or Polyani in this, successful work both science and the arts integrates the insight of the imagination with the precise labour of the intellect.

The enemy of science today is not among literary and cultural theorists who try to understand the complexities of the world, but among those fundamentalists who believe that ancient texts can provide a literal explanation of the world. In the United States, so-called creation science goes hand in hand with puritan literary censors in stifling primary and secondary education, and so leaves students devoid of the intellectual resources that alone can defend them against irrationalism. The theorists who point out that science is also a cultural product do not deny the possibility of truth, or even our knowledge of particular facts, but emphasise the provisional nature of all the explanatory systems by which we seek to give meaning to the elements of experience.

The proposition that all meaning is socially constructed does not exclude the role of individuals in its construction. Rather, it points out that creative individuals belong in their own cultures, which in turn give them the tools, most particularly language, that enable them to work. While one of the roles of imagination is to enable individuals to see beyond the intellectual structures they have inherited, to see new ways of giving meaning to experience, none can position themselves on an Archimedean point outside the given world from which they can see it whole and use the lever of objective reason to shift it to a new plane of truth. We are all constrained by who we are, where we live and what languages we speak.

Critics who point to the masculine forms of modern scientific thought, including its metaphors, are using their imagination to reveal an unnecessary limit scientists place on their own endeavours. The machine metaphor used for Newton's work advanced our understanding of physical laws in an external universe, but did nothing to advance our understanding of our own relation to that universe. In terms of

human affairs, it led to what Blake - not a contemporary writer - characterised as 'Newton's sleep'. The rape metaphor, on the other hand, advances our understanding not only of how we have used, or misused, science, but also of how use of this kind is inherent in the way we have expressed the initial concept. By showing that we can play "'the gendered metaphor game' with any scientific discovery", Margarita Levin concedes the central point of cultural theory, that meaning is plural and produced by the culturally determined observer, not by the phenomenon itself, whether that phenomenon is an object in space or a script in a study. This ability to produce meaning is the glory of scientist, artist and humanist alike.

As Sandall shows, absurdities can certainly be found on the wilder shores of cultural theory, just as they can be in science. Newton himself attached as much value to his studies in alchemy as he did to his discoveries in physics. The scientific world in this generation has been much disturbed by scientists who have resorted to fraud to prove otherwise unsupported theories. The premature release of rabbit virus from its supposedly impregnable CSIRO trialling grounds may be an example of the rape metaphor, or perhaps of the equally ancient principle of hubris. But none of these events in itself discredits science, any more than the more extreme projections of theory discredit the humanities, or an occasional nonsense does the arts. But all of these disciplines are discredited as long as they merely dismiss thoughtful criticism, particularly criticism that challenges their fundamental assumptions.

The rise of superstition at the end of the twentieth century demands explanation as well as denunciation. Often it reflects fear of a technology out of control, or in the control of corporations and authorities answerable to no wider public interest. It also reflects a widespread social collapse which threatens to take from individuals control over even their immediate circumstances. Just as the Luddites had reason to oppose technologies that were destroying their means of livelihood and their ancestral dwelling-places, so their modern successors attack science because they cannot get at the men who control it, and turn to superstition because reason is not enough to satisfy their human needs.

The restoration of control over our circumstances and environment depends, as Sandall rightly emphasises, on scientific knowledge. But it also requires an understanding of the limitations of science and of the reasons people are turning from it. This will require the efforts of artists, historians, sociologists and cultural theorists. It will also require some degree of self-criticism from scientists, a recognition that there are many paths to knowledge, and many means of advancing even scientific knowledge. Our future depends on neither science nor the arts, but on their mutual co-operation.

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