

DEBATE

How to Stay in Academia without Becoming Cynical?

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This text is an adapted translation of the speech given at the ceremony for the Schader Preis 2022, a German prize handed out to scholars in the social sciences whose work contributes to addressing societal problems. The German original can be found at https://www.schader-stiftung.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Schader-Preis_2022_Vortrag_Lisa_Herzog.pdf.

“How do you manage to stay in academia without becoming cynical?” That’s what a doctoral student asked me recently, when I was visiting another research institution. I was supposed to talk to him about his research topics, but instead, he felt the need to ask much more fundamental questions.

There are many reasons why one could become cynical in academia. Science – which I here mean as including the social sciences and humanities, “Wissenschaft” in the broad sense – is supposed to be the pure striving for knowledge, insight, maybe even truth, if you want to use such a big word. But the processes of knowledge generation are all too human. They take place in social contexts in which many things can get in the way of these ideals: various forms of power and social exclusion, arbitrary decisions, and in Germany also the difficulty of moving from temporary position to temporary position. In addition, in societies that combine a democratic political system with a capitalist economic system, the question often arises: whom does science serve?

For a long time, the misunderstanding that science was “value-free” persisted, and that one could therefore devote oneself to the pure search for truth without asking questions about values. If this were indeed the case, researchers would be relieved

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of the question of what motivates their work, who benefits from it, whose questions they investigate, and whose voices are heard in the process. According to this idea, academic research provides pure facts, while values and interests – and thus necessarily also conflicts – only play a role in other social spheres, for example politics.

But as the philosophy of science² has argued for a long time – successfully, in my opinion – values do play a role in science: in the choice of research topics as well as in the question of permissible research methods, e.g. ethical questions of research on humans and animals, or in decisions about which evidence thresholds are considered sufficient for individual or political action. In addition, complicated questions can arise about how to relate different bodies of knowledge, based on different methodologies, to each other. Of course, there are also steps in the research process that must be carried out without being influenced by political or ethical values – otherwise what is happening would simply not be academic research. However, epistemic values – i.e., values that relate to the quality and nature of the knowledge to be generated – also play a role there, and they are often interwoven with ethical values in complex ways. And so, as an academic, you cannot avoid the question of which values drive your own work.

There are at least three possible answers to this question. The first is to refer to the inherent logic of science: to knowledge for its own sake, the pure desire to know and to understand, or to continue working on the questions that generations before one have already grappled with. Hardly anyone will endure the trials of an academic career if they are not driven by the intrinsic fascination with research. This, however, does not yet answer the question to which topics one should devote one's scientific energy. Sometimes it may be enough to simply continue the work on projects that others have started – but what if the existing paradigms exhaust themselves? And is it really ideal for the scientific discourse to revolve only around itself, without any external impulses?

This attitude might also shift all too easily from an orientation towards “pure science” towards the logic of scientific careers: what gives you recognition in your field, which trends prevail there? Especially when many positions in science are precarious and the competition for permanent jobs is fierce, young scientists are almost forced to put the value “I want to stay in the scientific system” at the top of their agenda. This can lead to conformism and insufficient criticism of existing paradigms – and, also,

2 See in particular Heather Douglas. 2009. *Science, Policy, and the Value Free Ideal*. Pittsburg: Pittsburg University Press.

all too easily to cynicism, given the discrepancies between the noble ideals of science and what the scientific community really rewards.

A second possible answer to the question of values is to put one's research directly or indirectly into the service of economic value creation. Knowledge has many characteristics of a common good: it takes effort to produce it; but once it is there, it can be used by everyone, and may therefore need to be protected by intellectual property rights. In capitalist-democratic societies, we can expect a clear pattern: knowledge that is economically useful is privately appropriated, and sometimes also generated with admirable speed by private-sector actors. Knowledge that serves the general public, let alone knowledge that would imply that someone has to take on costly responsibilities, is typically not provided by market players, or only if they find a way of making profits by addressing it. Such happy coincidences of private interests and the common good can exist, but it would be naïve to assume that they are everywhere. Too much is now known about how capitalist players, e.g. the tobacco industry, have abused science for their own interests, against the interests of the common good. In the case of the tobacco industry, this meant: systematically promoting those researchers who considered the health risks of tobacco consumption to be negligible and distorting public discourse around the harms of smoking.³

Researchers who put themselves in the service of the private sector – which may suggest itself especially in more applied fields – have to ask themselves which values they are thereby serving and whether the collaboration is legitimate. They need to keep in mind what it means for society's long-term trust in science if science teams up with economically interested actors in problematic ways.

The third alternative is that science explicitly serves certain social values. Of course, democratic societies thrive on the fact that there is a pluralism of ways of life and thus also of values. But there is also what John Rawls called the "overlapping consensus": agreement on certain non-negotiable core values, such as those enshrined in the Declarations of Human Rights.⁴ In recent years, in view of climate change and biodiversity loss, the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations have emerged as another set of broadly acceptable values.⁵ They understand "sustainability" not only in terms of ecology, but also encompass a wide range of social goals.

3 See e.g. Naomi Oreskes and Eric Conway. 2010. *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*. London: Bloomsbury.

4 See in particular John Rawls. 1987. "The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus." *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 7(1): 1-25.

5 <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.

Generating knowledge that can help to achieve these goals, without giving up rigorous standards of scientific methodology, whatever they are in different fields – this can also be an answer to the question of which values research pursues. This orientation can interact with the internal logic of research, and sometimes also with an application-oriented logic in the sense of commercial usage. But it means setting clear priorities, and it can also require the delineation from certain research fields or types of collaborations. Moreover, it means asking oneself, as a researcher, how one’s own scientific knowledge can be combined with other relevant forms of knowledge, for example, the experiential knowledge of those directly affected, or the knowledge of indigenous peoples, when it comes to the solution of concrete problems.

Science in the service of the common good, that may sound like big words – or like youthful naivety. But just imagine what it would mean if every researcher would work, say for one day a week, on a project that directly serves a specific social goal (which, by the way, can also happen together with students). This could consist in a citizen science project on environmental issues in one’s own region, or in a cooperation with schools, especially in districts where children rarely meet scientists, or in cooperation with colleagues from the Global South, who are so often disadvantaged, or in attempts to help at-risk scientists⁶ to continue to contribute their knowledge to scientific discourse. In view of today’s extreme forms of social inequality and social fragmentation, I see it as a particularly important task for my own field, the social sciences and social philosophy, to enter into dialogue with those who are otherwise rarely heard, but who, given their experiences, can possibly contribute particularly important perspectives on today’s social order.

Of course, there can then be conflicts about what the most valuable projects are – but in democratic societies, we can accept a healthy pluralism of values, and thus also of value-oriented projects. And of course, there will also be individuals who use such projects to advance their careers. Nevertheless, it would offer the possibility of living academia in a different way than what “the system” currently demands of young scientists. My optimism in this respect is based on my experiences with those spaces in academia, for example the young academies,⁷ where something like this is already happening. But today, these are often privileged spaces that are only accessible to those who have been very fortunate in the academic system. Imagine the social dynamics that could develop if all scientists had the opportunity to develop concrete

6 This term is used to refer to scholars who are threatened for political reasons and/or have to leave their countries because of such threats or because of other forms of violence. See <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/faqs/#4>.

7 See e.g. <https://globalyoungacademy.net>.

projects in cooperation with society! Ideally, they do so while holding permanent positions that offer enough security even for long-term and risky projects.

Ultimately, this is also a question about the future of democracy. Democracies in modern, highly complex societies require numerous forms of expertise, including scientific expertise – not only in the form of “policy advice,” but also in order to inform the general public (call it “citizen advice” if you like), and in cooperation with civil society. If science does not deliver in this respect, this can all too easily lead to an imbalance of power that undermines democracy’s ability to regulate the economic system effectively, especially in the face of opposition from powerful economic players. If the knowledge of how regulation could be beneficial to the common good lies with the actors who are supposed to be regulated, and is possibly even *withheld* by them, this jeopardizes the ability of democratic politics to set the rules of the game, and thus undermines the “primacy of politics.”⁸

Staying in academia without becoming cynical – for me, this has not always been easy, and it often meant working against the system rather than with it. But “the system” is ultimately all of us, especially those of us who no longer have to worry about getting the next job contract. We need an open discussion about what values are driving this system. All three value orientations that I have described can have a legitimate place. But we need to be honest about which game is being played (and collaborations with interested economic parties will require careful delineations and clear governance structures). And from the point of view of democratic theory, the logic oriented towards the common good must have the last word.

All of this also means that academia, as a system, needs to engage in a meta-discourse: about its own goals and values, and about how these are achieved or missed in the existing institutions, incentive systems, and social practices. And as an individual, you need others with whom you can exchange ideas and arguments about these questions, both in general, and when it comes to very specific decisions about setting one’s own research priorities, deciding what invitations to accept, or dealing with the constant pressure to acquire third-party funding.

Therefore, I would like to close with a big “thank you” to all those who have been, and continue to be, my role models for non-cynical science, and to all those inside and outside of science with whom I can talk about these issues. I remain committed

8 Sheri Berman. 2006. *The Primacy of Politics. Social Democracy and the Making of Europe’s Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

to changing the scientific system in this direction, to finding projects with which one can make a real contribution to solving social problems, and to enabling everyone, but above all young scientists, to do this as well.

Thank you very much!