Freedom of Speech and Pure Science in the Digital Holocene

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According to Eric Hobsbawm, who coined the term "the short 20th century", the 20th century was over in 1991. Others counter that it was over in 2017. It seems well concluded, however, that the 20th century is, indeed, now a thing of the past. Some scholars question the extent to which – and what it means to the extent that – we see the passing of the "modern", temporally, with the end of the 20th century. Some ask what, then, does that make us now? While "modern" may at times be used, alternatively, to describe the contemporary, always implying a *before* and an *after*, it may also be approached as an (historically situated) discourse and a project. It may, as well, be approached as an (historically situated) economic framework and/or set of conceptual lenses associated with certain intellectual and/or political agendas. Drawing upon the internet as a digital reflection of the a *common consciousness*, or grassroots, we find that "the people" seem even more concerned with this question: We must come up with a new defining Meta-Identity. That is, we have been holding onto our 19th and 20th century narrative, discourse, project, conceptual lenses, and the sense of *endless contemporality* imbued in the words (late-) "modernity" and "modernization" for – a long time, temporally speaking. (By *endless contemporality* we mean an equating, over long periods of time, of the contemporary with the modern and the modern with the contemporary; and, possibly, also with contempt for "non-modern" periods and frameworks.) Increasingly, even those who do not necessarily suggest that we are now beyond the modern era question the term "modern". Perhaps we are now post-industrial, post-modern, post-structural, or post-material in nature. What, then, is our Age called?

Favoring Academic Humor: Our Digital Holocene, Softened Socratic-Buddhist Age

We came to the brief and simplest conclusion offered by a rather cursory appeal to (e.g., "search" of) the sages of the internet: Today, we live in The Digital Age according to those categorizing by economic structure and cultural ethos (alternately called, by some, the End of the Age of Paper). We live in the Holocene Epoch according to those categorizing by paleontological (or geological) strata. Somewhat disturbingly, the Holocene follows the Pleistocene directly. Perhaps we have not come quite such a long way after all. The Holocene, apparently, does not yet have a "late" and an "early" part, as with all other eras in the Phanerozoic Eon of which we are a part (although it can be broken down into other sub-parts); so, in a very real sense, we seem only just to have arrived.

According to forums at DigitalSpy.com, we get suggestions for naming our new era, including: The New Elizabethans; The Technology Revolution; The Charlies or The Willies (after those in line to the British throne); and The Social Media Era. From that source, we also get The Doldrums, The Second Depression, The Georgian Era, and, back to the paleontological, The Cenozoic Era as suggestions. (We note that all of these would make great band names.) Wikipedia suggests The Information Age, also known as The Digital Age. Indeed, Douglas Adams was perhaps prophetic in predicting our coming dependence upon things digital in 1979, when he wrote that Earthlings were "so amazingly primitive that they still think digital watches are a pretty neat idea". So, perhaps we have come a long way after all, as our society now takes digital watches (and other things digital) so much for granted that we may be alone in longing for the analog. Since the modern era of the 19th and 20th centuries was, indeed, defined by the analog – that is, things moved with dials and wrenches and gears and wheels and springs and coils – it does appear appropriate to name ours, among other things, The Digital Age.

We want to add another set of qualifiers to defining the age in which we now live. These are qualifiers of intellectual and cultural ethos, which is to say, a generalized normative range of acceptable public (and even private) discourse about *how things are* and *where we stand*. If Mark Twain's acerbic (and wonderful) wit was a defining trait of the Socratic skepticism of the late-19th and most of the 20th century, then our post-1991 or post-2017 *après* 20th century, depending whether you believe Hobsbawm or others, may best be defined by a *Softened Socratic Buddhism*, for lack of a better term. That is, while skepticism still has its place, it has become less acceptable to use "systematic doubt and questioning of another" in the form of intellectual interrogation than was once the case. A softer form of intellectual query – more supportive, collaborative, and constructive in nature – seems to have become more the norm. As a discipline, we might like to think that some of our own works could have had an influence on this gentling process. Likewise, what some of the post-Hippie generation called the New Age has likely had its impact upon us as well in that Buddhist concepts of suffering as resolvable – and most appropriately so – may have contributed to softening our skepticism in its more aggressive forms. Whatever the cause, from our perspective, these apparent changes to our intellectual and cultural norms regarding substantive discourse are positive.

Enter, freedom of speech and pure science in our *Digital Holocene* (in terms of economic culture and paleontological period) and *Softened Socratic-Buddhist Age* (in terms of intellectual culture). We all meditate to resolve our various sufferings through the Buddhist Four Noble Truths. We do our Yoga, and our medical, Ayurvedic (South Asian) massage or Chinese Reflexology. Does it help us to be more civil and more softened in the face of the modern era's residual influence upon us in its, at times, tendency toward destructive (and even cannibalistic) critique rather than constructive or collaborative query?

Favoring Freedom of Speech and Pure Science

We think that it does. At the broad, cultural or societal levels, the diversity of opinions being expressed in political media today is extraordinary. It sometimes includes turpitude, accusation-before-evidence, the demand to prove innocence rather than to prove guilt, and the like. We all watch the news and see it every day, particularly if we keep an eye and an ear on CNN, Fox News, NPR, the New York Times, Talk Radio's various programming, BBC World, French 24 News, and others on a regular basis. The attacks and counter-attacks are unusual in their anger and vengeance. At times, they include speech of an outrageous quality, reminding even of anti-Semitic smear tactics of an earlier era in which associating someone with Judaism (and, now, with Israel) is seen, somehow, as publishable and meaningful material. So, we see the appalling and the unacceptable in our disparate discourses, which we nonetheless find critical as protected free speech and thought, if for no other reason than the principle *to speak is to be known*.

What we do not see with all of this baseness, however, is war. We do not see blood. We do not see revolution. We may, individually, become angry, and we may even become outraged. But, it appears, finally, that we have accepted one another's right to disagree without resorting to violence (see, the French and the Bolshevik revolutions as examples of what happens when we do not agree to this freedom of speech and thought as a fundamental social contract). Many of us hope that this agreement to disagree is embraced in the academic arena as well. For example, we think many scholars would agree that while the peer-review process should be used to ensure academic quality (pp. 49-73), it should not be used to exclude opposing views, or to exclude evidence opposing one's own paradigms, methods, or epistemologies. It should not be used to exclude information that one party does not want made public because of his or her own political positions on a subject, be the subject the Middle East, socialism, or any other topic, and on any side of the political spectrum.

By way of example, why should it be that Israel's origins as a socialist state founded by a labor movement with ties to both socialist and communist movements in Europe – an entirely non-controversial claim for political scientists who are experts in Israel, although it is apparently controversial for others – should be threatening to some as an historical fact or stage? Should it be any more threatening that the state is best compared with European social democracies, analytically, albeit with more recent neoliberal push-back? Should it be threatening to us to have to read about Israel at all, given the claims of the BDS (international boycott Israel) movement? Or, for that matter, should it be threatening to us to have to read about Palestinians? And, are we allowed to write about Palestinians who are citizens of Israel, who rarely get hearing in western media or academic sources? Or, is it more threatening to have to

read about Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza on their own terms; the Palestinian Diaspora; or Palestinian refugees? Can these topics be addressed only by insiders? Or, do outsiders have anything to offer in observation and/or analysis? Has all "legitimate" – in the sense of publishable – analysis of such topics devolved into pure identity politics itself, or do a range of standpoints matter? Indeed, does scientific inquiry, regardless of these other considerations, matter to the academy?

In addition to the questions already stated, and importantly: Should controversy on any of these items among American policy analysts and pundits, or non-Israel or Palestine research specialists, affect our decisions regarding scientific inquiry into these matters? Or, do we not mean what we say when we talk about peer review by experts in the given field as a matter of scientific validity?

Whether the subject is conflict among Zionists and post-Zionists, which can rise to resounding levels, or the BDS movement's desire to exclude both from the pages of the academic world for association with Israel, we believe that we stand with the many in suggesting that scientific discovery must be the primary goal in our decisions about scholarship – publishing, conferences, admissions, promotions, etc. Intellectual boycotts are the most anti-intellectual positions possible, whatever the topic being denied hearing because it is an affront to someone else's suffering. That is, whether the topic be the equally important questions – scientifically, although not perhaps personally to all individuals – of Palestinian rights or Israeli political culture, intellectual freedom and a drive for significant scientific inquiry must be paramount in our academic publishing, as elsewhere. Other national and regional examples can be used in place of Palestinians and Israel for the purposes of this analysis.

Ideological and Epistemological Discomfort in Pure Science

The pursuit of knowledge includes many uncomfortable moments in which our own expectations and deeply-held positions are questioned – through reinterpretation of existing knowledge, or by new knowledge and information (e.g., through field work, data analysis, content analysis, political-philosophical analysis, or what in general should be called "scientific discovery"). We can resort only to Thomas Kuhn in defense of this discomfort as a fundamental component of the scientific method and the scientific process, whether we speak of the Copernican Revolution, or the advances of Galileo or Sir Isaac Newton. It might be a truism to say that all scientific change of note comes with some degree of discomfort. If we avoid that discomfort, we fall into that arena that we call bad science. Bad science may reproduce itself well but becomes decreasingly valid over time, whether we are talking about the scientific paradigms overturned by the scientific revolutions of Thomas Kuhn fame, or Orientalism as an academic field of study reproducing itself as a sort of ungrounded, bad science of Edward Said fame.

We are suggesting pure science in the strict Kuhnian sense of scientific method, that is, as a single research method that can be used for an extraordinarily wide range of inquiry in terms of (question-specific) methods and epistemologies. Drawing from Kuhn, one can say that the single method can be broken down at its most basic core to: *Puzzle; Deductive Hypothesis*; *Observation* (new data collection and observation); *Synthesis* (is hypothesis supported by results?); and *Conclusions* (yes, hypothesis is supported by results; or, no, hypothesis is not supported, we report that fact and the why of it, and we begin the process again) (see circa pps. 38-42). For Kuhn, the puzzle is critical to good scientific inquiry; he is concerned, in part, that puzzles are informed by assumptions coming from the power of existing paradigms (particularly in contexts that Bourdieu might call symbolic violence, or distortion employed in the power of naming). Without paradigms, on the other hand, for Kuhn, it is difficult to know where to start, and data collection may appear to be haphazard and/or overwhelming (see pps. 15-16). Such fishing expeditions, to use our informal disciplinary language for it, may, nonetheless, be necessary in the early stages of scientific inquiry on a topic. "Normal science" is a prerequisite for paradigmatic changes in prevailing scientific meta-theories for Kuhn, as it provides the backbone of scientific knowledge that allows for the construction of an informed, deductive hypothesis. Likewise, jumping from one paradigm to another can be as problematic, in terms of scientific accuracy, as refusing all change in scientific paradigms. That is, perhaps Kuhn is a man of the middle path.

Importantly, the sciences themselves go through long debates regarding what discipline is a legitimate science (see pps. 160-161). For political scientists, we believe, it is important to remember that the scientific method applies equally to physics, chemistry, and natural history (e.g., the latter seen as the historical/qualitative end of the spectrum

in, for example, Biology and Paleontology). Reading The Voyage of the Beagle is instructive in this regard. We are suggesting that the scientific method equally applies to all ends of the spectrum in political science when political science is done well. That is, it does not matter what type of data is being used or analyzed for the scientific method to be applied correctly. When the scientific method is applied incorrectly, the type of data (or analysis) is similarly not likely to help to make the results valid.

In terms of similar debates in the IR field, we are suggesting that a pure science approach can be linked precisely with historical and qualitative empirical methods (e.g., observation, archives, interviews, etc.) without the need to draw upon the more specific methods of behavioralism within the discipline. In this sense, we agree with Curtis and Koivisto in supporting historical-sociological analysis in political science. Rather than viewing science as generalizing and history as individualizing, however, we are suggesting that good science can be either, and that either qualitative or quantitative data and analysis can be used to make good science or bad science.

Conclusion

Political science does not deal with particles moving under intense pressure. It does not study prisms in the physical sense, although it may address them in the multi-cultural sense. Nor does it consider the place of the Sun in the Universe. Nevertheless, it does discover and analyze human phenomena that are significant to our world. At its best, it engages in scientific discovery, whether that discovery is achieved through field work or through mining previously untouched data sets. It does so whether it is mining archival sources; heretofore unknown (or significantly changing) institutions and social phenomena; or statistical abstracts. It does so whether it is gathering and analyzing original material on formal rules, or informal practices *in situ*. That there should and must be a division of labor within the discipline in these scientific efforts goes without saying; no one person is capable of all of these endeavors, certainly not at one time.

Political science should be treated – and, even more importantly, should treat itself – as a *science*. We have the political freedom to treat ourselves as a science, a freedom that should by no measure be taken for granted. As a simple, empirical reality, not all peoples or polities have or experience this *scientific* freedom. Having each lived, personally, in the underdeveloped, developing, and developed worlds, we believe that this point cannot be overstated. We do ourselves, and world scholarship, a disservice to the extent that we forswear our freedom*and responsibility* to pure science, which our political (and economic) context affords us.

On the side of constraint, we recognize the pragmatic rights of states to determine what issues of politics can be analyzed, addressed, and researched in their country contexts. That includes, even, the U.S. In engaging in scientific inquiry, however, let us not confuse that right of states with self-appointed gate-keepers within the discipline making uninformed decisions about other people's areas of expertise based upon their own (perhaps narrowly informed) perceptions. We must take our scientific process seriously enough to accept that experts on a given region or state or topic are the best equipped to determine the safest boundaries to maintain in relation to research in their own areas of expertise (*to wit*, the Palestinians – Israel discussion above).

In political science – as a science – we are meant to be a source of reliable information. We are also meant to be a source of corresponding and contradicting: theories, frameworks, conceptualizations, and, perhaps, even postulated taxonomies. We should not confuse our efforts at scientific discovery with the needs of politicians, pundits, or policy makers. That is not to say that politicians, pundits, or policy makers should be excluded from scientific discovery, only that scientific results, by definition, cannot be *scientific* if they are slanted by personal or policy preferences. To the extent that we, as scholars, allow the needs of such actors or considerations to drive our results, we devolve into little more than public relations tools, and we stray far from science. Our work as political scientists contributes to all of the above – meaningfully – only to the extent that it is engaged in freely as pure science in this, our*Digital Holocene, Softened Socratic-Buddhist Age*.

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