Capitalist canon

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Published: 2025-06-21

Dear friends,

Did you know that the pain experienced by ocean life suffocated during mass farming for human consumption has been quantified in asphyxiation statistics[1]?

Taking for granted, for a moment, that studies such as these are done in the face of such terrible human cruelty, I' d like to spend some time thinking about the primacy of capitalist logics in science. In a workshop yesterday, I spent some time with medical scientists where we discussed the philosophy of science –not in terms of sitting cross legged resting chins on fists, but in terms of thinking about frequently unquestioned assumptions in science. During this discussion we came to grips, quite quickly actually, with the inhumanity of "science" . Indeed, the entire conversation began a little like this:

"We' re scientists, so we are stripped of our humanity, ourselves and our presence in our writing before we even think about writing."

Many have posited that this dehumanising process tacitly occurs in positivist sciences[2]. The demand for an *objective* view of reality, which is essential to the belief that science can be objective, requires the scientist erasing themselves from the work. This belief, that humans cannot be objective, drives a deeply rationalist approach to science, and enables a greater divide between the natural/physical and social sciences. This division has historically constructed some sciences as more valid and asserts that human involvement demands subjectivity which pollutes the 'truth' , but this is all a cover for the real politics of science. Moreover, the supposed validity of natural and physical sciences comes at a human cost, both of the scientist as person, worker, thinker, and so on, and more broadly in their knowing and doing. Let me simplify.

To do natural science, as my workshop friends put it, consist of "pipetting things and recording the change/s" . In the transmission of the science, the changes are communicated. There is no active role for the human, other than perhaps to record error, or declare funders and 'influences' . Natural sciences, here, are largely dehumanised. While there are some post-positivist emergences, the vast majority of natural and, perhaps more importantly, biological sciences remain bound by a tradition which either brackets human involvement or demands their erasure in the communication process. To verify, validate, or confirm the results, other dehumanised nodes contribute validatory studies. And together, this canon of 'objective' literature decides how objective, how valid, and how controlled something is while ever bracketing human involvement.

The point of rupture in this paradigm is learning that something humans did –an experimental technique, a way of working, or a way of reporting the work –invalidated the result in an earlier link in the chain of investigation. Let' s take a result close to home, in anthropology to start ("a social science?!" , you say, well, yes, it' s a golden example), then we' ll look at two more:

In traditional anthropology there is an active claim that the tradition provides objective descriptions of "primitive" cultures. However, critics showed how anthropologist' s presence, cultural assumptions, and power dynamics inevitably shaped what they observed and how communities responded. Indeed, the very assumption of "primitive" coloured the supposedly objective reporting. As a response reflexive anthropology was born and goes some way toward acknowledging the researcher as an active participant rather than a neutral recorder[3]. But let' s turn to some natural science examples.

Microbiology had traditionally focused on pathogenic bacteria as invaders to be eliminated[4]. But this paradigm was built around human cultural concepts of cleanliness and contamination. The shift to understanding humans as ecosystems revealed that our bodies are fundamentally collaborative communities with microbes - challenging the human/nature divide that had been unconsciously structuring the field[5].

And finally, for decades, researchers treated lab animals as standardised biological machines, assuming their behaviour reflected "pure" genetic or physiological responses. But studies revealed that handling by researchers, laboratory conditions, and even the gender of experimenters significantly altered animal stress hormones, immune function, and behaviour[6]. This forced recognition that the human research environment was "invisibly" shaping the natural biological processes being studied[7].

We should also turn attention to colonisation, particularly given our brief look at anthropology, a discipline often critiqued by the natural and physical sciences for its "failings" from subjectivity. In social sciences we see a great deal of justified critique of supposed objectivity, to the point that the language used in many social sciences has moved towards "reliability" and "truthfulness" rather than "validity" and "confirmation". But this detouring from natural and physical scientific terms does not fundamentally challenge the politics of science. Colonialism, in particular in regard to anthropology, has been revealed as one of the driving forces of supposed objectivity from social scientists, allowing assumptions of subjects' "primitivism" and "evolution". This was source of justification for ever more violent colonial practices. But this is not the only effect of colonisation on science, indeed science itself –objective or not –is constructed within a western (European) epistemological and political framework which has always assumed hierarchies of things: man over woman, capitalist over worker, white over black, and so on.

It is important that we weave together all sciences under a "western", or Eurocentric, canon –an epistemology (way of knowing) which inherently contains hierarchies, ways of working, assumptions about superiority, justifications for violence, and more. Indeed, even within the episteme, there are critiques of natural and physical sciences from social scientists which have had some impact on a trend of discussing the affect of the presence of and role of the researcher and their politics and conditions on the research outcomes[8].

Far from being an objective, universal method of understanding the world, western scientific frameworks embed hierarchical power structures that serve to justify colonial violence and continue to marginalise Indigenous ways of knowing[9]. Colonialism did not "misuse"science; it fundamentally shaped what counts as scientific knowledge, who can be a legitimate knower, and how knowledge should/could be validated[10]. Mignolo, for instance, has examined epistemic disobedience arguing that western epistemology maintains knowledge hierarchies through the hubris of the zero point (from Castro-Gómez), the false claim of neutral, objective observation[11].

Historical evidence demonstrates time and again that scientific work did not *accidentally* support colonialism. It was deliberately designed to provide intellectual justification for colonial violence and exploitation. Darwin' s The Descent of Man (1871) is often used to exemplify this explicit connection. Working against these hierarchies and political positioning –the use of the western canon of research as a false prophet for the eradication of "the other"–has required a lifetime of scholarly work and activism to put a blip on the radar of challenging the west' s political epistemic and scientific "dominance". With the explosion of Critical Indigenous Studies, following radical thinkers such as Distinguished Professor Aunty Moreton-Robinson, multiple ways of knowing have become more recognised. The fundamental politics of western knowledge, however, remains largely under-critiqued by the hegemony –the mainstream. More calls for solidarity and allyship from this mainstream surface by the day[12] and remarkable dynamism from Indigenous thinkers adapt and transform the political methods of western research approaches to community contexts[13] or challenge

them fundamentally[14]. However, additional comradery is ever required to challenge the dominance of the racist, sexist, and pro-capitalist modality woven into science.

At this juncture it becomes important that we discuss how capitalism treats the anglophone, western, or Eurocentric episteme. This is nowhere more manifest than the way capitalism treats research and researchers –and conditions the role and nature of the university, the research institute, or the laboratory. Indeed, in our current moment interesting political forces are (re)shaping the role and nature of research and universities in a paradigm that has so deeply captured the academic imaginary it has become a top 5 bingo card buzzword in papers, lectures, forums, interviews, discussions, books and so much more. Neoliberalism, the politics of knowledge and production under late capitalism, suggests to most of its users a set of radically unfair conditions, regressions to policy and place, and a distortion of the very nature of science.

We explored above a few ways in which science has been challenged from the margins. There are endless calls from Indigenous thinkers who have succeeded in rattled mainstream sciences to demand truth, action, and transformation. As these calls convert to action in our institutions, the broader political landscape which demands science to justify the actions of the oppressor (capitalists) is metastasising to an antiscientific modality. Rather reckon with the ills of the past and present, the capitalist political apparatus has turned its attention toward disinformation to justify its extremism. Within episteme conditioned by science, this leads critical thinkers, educators, and compassionate people to question the political world. This turn pushes universities and research institutes ever more into the active political sphere, which the antiscientific extremist capitalism uses as further justification for more extreme crackdowns on workers the world over.

Look no further than the "insane" configuration of world leadership at this moment. From Anthony Albanese supporting gas projects which simultaneously risk utter destruction of world heritage listed Aboriginal rock art, and unleashes thousands of tonnes of CO2 into an already $>3^{o}$ global warming trajectory, to Donald Trump' s unwavering support of the Israeli genocidal regime threatening nuclear destruction of a middle eastern nation, the post-truth world asks for no science to rationalise its descent into madness. We' re also seeing increasingly despotic leadership of public institutions, from government departments led by the antivaxxing ilk of RFK Jr., to the appointment of vice chancellors with multi-million-dollar salaries. There is, no longer, a need for truth, objectivity, or rationality –as "the other" ever shifts into new political enemies to drive the 3 year political cycle, the 24 hour news cycle, or any other capitalist directed time blind fugue state.

This moment demands a new epistemology, drawn on a relational ontology, that centres ecology not economy. What science does offer is an intellectually curious graveyard, which has oft bracketed the very nature of humanity while being utterly human. Flawed, but capable of learning and change. What we need is a curious, compassionate, and co-created future. One that does not look at the agony endured by fish in human murder and say "that' s worth $30 million dollars" but looks at agony, suffering, and the utter destruction of our oceans[15] and says –enough.

Together, by (re)centering relationality and care, we can find a better way to think. A better way to do. And a better way to be. We can do that with the help of science, education, and collaboration, or we can go the way of the dictators, and rationalise ourselves out of existence to the point that madness rules. The choice, to me, is clear. Is it clear to you?

In solidarity,

Aidan

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