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Symposium

Perils for science in democracies and authoritarian countries

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The symposium will discuss some prevalent dangers for science and technology in democratic countries. Science is affected by many societal factors, including the tendency for market principles to constrain academic values and render science a tool for application, marginalizing long-term oriented basic research. We will not discuss these factors here, but we focus on the decline of standards in education in many countries for various reasons, and on the risks to securing excellence in science through the principle of diversity and equity imposed by public opinion, administration, and mass media particularly in the United States but also in other countries.

While equal treatment and the system of merit based on individual achievements regardless of race, gender, and class have been longstanding guiding principles to reduce injustice and at the same time maintain high standards in science, 'diversity and equity' suggests or even mandates equality in terms of absolute numbers of people in specific subgroups. The resulting political pressure on individuals and institutions is not expected to lead to the same dire consequences as in authoritarian countries. However, according to many commentators, the damage done to careers and the downgrading of scientific standards will have serious long-term repercussions not only for individuals but for science as a whole. In order to provide a historical perspective, the symposium also reviews the impact of the implementation of racial principles into academia through anti-Jewish measures in Nazi Germany and selected cases of political interference with science in the USSR and post-Soviet Russia.

The symposium examines examples from many disciplines and wider analyses of ideologically motivated interference with teaching and publishing today. It will discuss how placing group identity, in contrast to the maxim of equality of opportunity regardless of group membership, at the center of assessments, and the suppression of academic freedom have begun to endanger standards in science, mathematic, technology, and engineering in the US and other Western countries. Thus a recent paper (Deift et al.

2021) warns of a strong decline of the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics system in the United States. In addition to the "deplorable state of the mathematical education system" the authors see the reasons for their concern in the "nationwide effort to reduce racial disparities." This effort, "however well-intentioned, has had the unfortunate effect of weakening the connection between merit and scholastic admission. It also has served (sometimes indirectly) to discriminate against certain groups—mainly Asian Americans."

The symposium does not pursue political goals or deal with general political campaigns but focuses on the dangers that identity politics as eligibility criterion and the suppression of academic freedom pose to science irrespective of the political tendencies they may emanate from.