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Article

On the Intellectual Freedom and Responsibility of Scientists in the Time of "Consequences Culture"

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Abstract: The 20th century witnessed unimaginable atrocities perpetrated in the name of ideologies that stifled dissent in favour of political narratives, with numerous examples of resulting long-term societal harm. Despite clear historical precedents, calls to deal with dissent through censorship have risen dramatically. Most alarmingly, politically motivated censorship has risen in the academic community, where pluralism is most needed to seek truth and generate knowledge. Recent calls for censorship have come under the name of "consequences culture", a culture structured around the inclusion of those sharing a particular narrative while imposing adverse consequences on those who dissent. Here, we place "consequences culture" in the historical context of totalitarian societies, focusing on the fate suffered by academics in those societies. We support our arguments with extensive references, many of which are not widely known in the West. We invite the broader scientific community to consider yet again what are timeless subjects: the importance of freely exchanging views and ideas; the freedom to do so without fear of intimidation; the folly of undermining such exchanges with distortions; and the peril of attempting to eliminate exchanges by purging published documents from the official record. We conclude with suggestions on where to go from here.

Keywords: academic freedom; scientific ethics; censorship; consequences culture; scientific integrity; retractions

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Every lie we tell incurs a debt to the truth. Sooner or later, that debt is paid.

Chernobyl, Valery Legasov (2019)

Introduction

Progress that democratic societies have so far enjoyed owes much to the recognition that, to paraphrase Andrei Sakharov, intellectual freedom is vital to the continued peaceful and prosperous existence of humanity (Sakharov & Salisbury, 1968). Abraham Flexner, the Founding Director of the Institute of Advanced Study, similarly remarked how "Now and then a thoughtless individual in one of the few democracies left in this world will even question the fundamental importance of absolutely untrammelled academic freedom" (Flexner & Dijkgraaf, 1939/2017). Poignantly, when he wrote those words in his timeless *The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge*, Flexner was reflecting on the precarious state of the world in 1939. Robert Merton also argued that organised scepticism was one of the key norms that earned science a special place of credibility in the wider society (Merton, 1974; Stevens et al., 2020). Prohibit expressions of that scepticism, and science loses that credibility because it becomes just another propaganda tool to be deployed for sectarian political purposes. Supporting these arguments is historical evidence of unimaginable atrocities perpetrated in the name of ideologies that stifled sceptical dissent in favour of political narratives and goals that were considered "loftier", from religious persecution to National Socialism and communism. In too many places of our imperfect world, dissent continues to carry risks that are, without exaggeration, grave. Only recently have the words of a renowned author, Salman Rushdie, been met with severe physical violence: he was stabbed and lost an eye at a venue where he was about to give a public lecture, a direct result of the late Iranian leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini calling for Rushdie's death by issuing a fatwa in 1989 (Murphy et al., 2022; Schuessler, 2022).

Despite a long and troubling history, calls for ideological conformity, censorship, and punishment of dissent continue. More troublingly, they are now coming from within Western democracies, from within academia, whose members are supposed to represent an intellectual elite entrusted with advancing knowledge and education. Most recently, some academic activists coined a new term for the same tried and tested ideological instrument of repression: "consequences culture" (Herbert, 2023; Herbert et al., 2022). The idea is simple: there is a preferred narrative that is defined by activists as "moral", "virtuous", and "correct". Vocal dissent against that narrative is supposed to bring with it adverse consequences to one's career and well-being. Although most clearly articulated by Herbert et al., the idea of consequences culture has been in place for some time now, with its proponents arguing for it as a necessary corrective to harmful speech;

yet in practice, it functions as a form of censorship that enforces ideological conformity. This extends beyond informal pressures. Indeed, while critical discussions on Herbert et al. were published by *The Journal of Physical Chemistry Letters* (JPCL), two direct rebuttals were rejected with the justification that they were "no longer interested" in the topic (JPCL, editorial communication). Such selective editorial decisions reflect a form of "soft censorship", where the suppression of dissent occurs not through outright bans but through the controlled curation of discourse.

Here, our goal is simple. We illustrate "consequences culture" with examples throughout the text, placing this ideological instrument in the historical context of totalitarian societies, whose methods it resembles in its enforcement of ideological conformity. We assert that "consequences culture" makes an open, honest, scholarly debate impossible by virtue of enforcing a preferred narrative through intimidation of those who challenge that narrative. Furthermore, "consequences culture" fosters intellectual dishonesty by advocating for censorship of dissenting views, and the removal of material from the official record, while permitting distortions that align with the preferred narrative. We conclude with some comments on the responsibility scientists have in defending the integrity of academic institutions against such oppressive ideologies.

"Consequences Culture" Is Antithetical to Open and Honest Debate

In 2020, Tomáš Hudlický submitted an essay to *Angewandte Chemie* (Hudlický, 2020) reviewing the evolution of organic synthesis since Seebach's prior reflection on the field three decades before (Seebach, 1990). The essay, which included a discussion on the organic synthesis community, was peer-reviewed, accepted by the journal, and a pre-publication version was uploaded to the journal server. Among several topics Hudlický addressed, he argued that in some cases, institutional policies mandating "equality in terms of absolute numbers of people in specific subgroups is counter-productive if it results in discrimination against the most meritorious candidates" (Hudlický, 2020). Then, in an unprecedented action, the published article vanished from the journal's server, with the DOI returning a 404 error (Howes, 2020). The withdrawal notice would appear some days later declaring that "the opinions expressed in this essay do not reflect our values of fairness, trustworthiness and social awareness" (Withdrawal, 2020).[1] Unofficial copies can be found online, and further information can be found in Howes (2020) and Sydnes (2021).

Based on the experience of some of us, the retraction was a flashback to the reality of the USSR, where texts and images could disappear, while the work and reputation of the authors would continue to be smeared in the official press by people scarcely familiar with the work, in front of an equally ignorant audience. All that mattered was the party-line label attached to the violators: anti-Soviet; politically nearsighted; imperialist; or some other term describing wrongthink. Indeed, the criticism of Hudlický's essay and the condemnation of the author all took place *after* the journal had already deleted the paper.

[1] The withdrawal notice (Withdrawal, 2020) says that Hudlický's article was published on June 4th; the article itself was already gone the next day (June 5th). Sydnes (2021) gives a timeline of the case, with one inconsistency: the article was gone before the withdrawal statement appeared, not after. First, the link returned a 404 error, and then it pointed to the journal webpage.

One of us remembers witnessing an eerily similar attempt to shut down a live television broadcast when its content did not fit the official narrative of the USSR, sometime in late 1989 or early 1990. There can be no honest debate over words that have been purged from the official record.

In the USSR, there was *samizdat*: forbidden texts copied by brave people on their typewriters in the middle of the night, covered with blankets to muffle the noise, lest conscientious neighbours report them to the authorities. The smudged pages would then be distributed among trusted friends, some of whom took those pages straight to their KGB handlers. Consequences for those guilty of wrongthink followed.[2] Now, instead of *samizdat*, there is the internet. Those who prefer to form their own opinions on the Hudlický matter can find unofficial copies of his essay and read his subsequent thoughts on the subject (Hudlický, 2020). As long as they keep their views to themselves, there is no danger. On the other hand, voicing the wrong opinion, sharing or liking the wrong tweet, or associating with the wrong colleague, brings people face to face with the advocates of consequences culture, for "It's not the thought that is punishable, but its expression" (Vaissié, 2015). Consequences suffered over the publication of Hudlický's essay included the suspension of the editors, blacklisting of the reviewers (Süssmuth et al., 2020), and pressure applied on Hudlický's colleagues and collaborators to distance themselves from him and his defenders (Hudlický, 2020).

Editor suspensions and reviewer blacklisting are usually reserved for instances of fraud that include collusion between authors, editors and reviewers. Even in such extreme cases, they are not commonly applied (Bricker-Anthony & Herzog, 2023; Else, 2021; Else & Van Noorden, 2021; Kincaid, 2022). The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE, 2019) produces principles for retraction that focus entirely on data fraud, rampant data error, double publication, and plagiarism. Although no journals are bound by them unless they choose to be, they constitute the only justified scientific reasons for retracting an article.

No evidence of fraud or data error has surfaced in the case of Hudlický. Nevertheless, Neville Compton, the Editor-in-Chief of *Angewandte Chemie*, deleted a paper that went through appropriate peer review and editorial processes and was accepted for publication. The deletion was based on the outrage voiced by some members of the scientific community. Science does not work this way, and neither does democracy. Indeed, one of the outcomes of the "consequences culture" in today's academia is that outrage mobs notwithstanding, it remains unclear on whose behalf Herbert et al. are speaking when they claim the seal of approval of the chemistry community for a narrative that is supposed to foster inclusion and excellence through punishment and intimidation. This question is not merely rhetorical: in 1973, 40 famous members of the Soviet Academy of Sciences signed a collective letter condemning Sakharov for "discredit[ing] the good name of Soviet Science" (Sacharov & Lourie, 1990), and in 1975, 72 members signed a letter protesting against his being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize (72 Soviet Academicians, 1975). At the same time, some members of the Soviet scientific community refused to sign, while others went even further: e.g., Yuri Orlov wrote an open letter in defence

[2] They used to be called "оргвыводы" (*orgvivody*), an abbreviation of two Russian words meaning "organisational measures", which, depending on the weight of the imaginary crime and the political climate, could mean anything from a dismissal to incarceration.

of Sakharov (Hoffstaetter et al., 2021; Orlov & Whitney, 1991). Orlov paid a price for his stance: he was charged with anti-Soviet propaganda over his dissident activities, and the letter was among the evidence. Orlov was imprisoned, exiled, and ultimately, deported (Orlov & Whitney, 1991). When Herbert et al. refer to "many" who "felt that these remarks deserved no place in a scholarly journal" (Herbert et al., 2022) to justify the deletion of Hudlický's essay, we once again find ourselves in the authoritarian territory of collective denunciations rather than in a democratic society that prides itself "on engaging in reasoned debate" (Herbert et al., 2022). When Herbert et al. defend "consequences" on the grounds that "it is natural for a community to maintain and enforce its social norms" (Herbert et al., 2022), we risk entering authoritarian territory where ends justify means. Indeed, enforcement of *scientific norms* is entirely appropriate for a scientific community, and one of those is that enforcement of subjective *social norms* has no place in scientific communication. While we do not dispute the need for proportional consequences in cases of genuine scientific misconduct and fraud, our concern lies in the problematic conflation of ideological dissent with misconduct – a conflation emblematic of "consequences culture".

Professional ostracism through intimidation of colleagues represents yet another example of a Soviet-style authoritarian method intended to stifle dissent, strip individuals of their agency, and subjugate them to the will of the mob (Bukovskiĭ & Kojevnikov, 2019; Danagoulian, 2021; Ioffe, 2004).[3,4,5] Since Herbert et al. are "firmly committed" to excellence, on a path towards which they claim to be forging through "the pursuit of … inclusion" (Herbert et al., 2022), they should keep in mind historical precedents that demonstrate the exclusionary nature of these methods and their incompatibility with excellence: in the Soviet Union, these methods destroyed the lives of countless scientists

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[3] In his book, Ioffe (2004) talks of a project to build an electron-positron accelerator with the energy of 100 GeV in the USSR in 1971 (the idea was close to that of the Large Electron-Positron Collider (LEP) commissioned in CERN in 1989). The project was cancelled because one of its authors was Yuri Orlov, a Soviet physicist who became persona non grata over his dissident activities. Publications referring to the project were forbidden, and so was the publication of other works where Orlov was cited (Orlov & Whitney, 1991).

[4] When in 1953, after he was fired from the Institute for Theoretical and Experimental Physics, Orlov asked why his name was being removed from his scientific works, the response was that his name brought shame to Soviet science. Anyone, who did not condemn Orlov, or did not agree to remove Orlov's name from the joint work, was punished (Orlov & Whitney, 1991).

[5] On p. 54 of the English edition, Bukovskiĭ (1979) describes a simple workingman in the post-Stalin times who, while being unquestionably loyal to the Party and to the ideals of Communism, dared to speak up about glitches in the implementation of these grand ideas – say, complaining about a leaking roof or bad food in a cafeteria. Unlike earlier times, this unfortunate fellow would not be immediately arrested and sent to a Gulag. Rather, he would be first summoned to an informal chat with a KGB representative who would explain to him, in a friendly voice, how his unbridled speech plays into the hands of the enemies of the Motherland, harming her in the ongoing struggle with the corrupt West. Then a general meeting would happen at his workplace, where speeches would be made by various functionaries and workmates: "They wrathfully condemn him up to shame, and the elderly foreman, Petrovich, declares that in his opinion there is no room for such people in their collective. Then our workingman speaks up himself, expressing repentance and promising to reform....[Then] the workers' collective resolves to take responsibility for its prodigal son and votes to reform him collectively. Sometime later this evening, in a pub, the elderly foreman, Petrovich, who has been loudest of all in his denunciation earlier that day, says confidentially to our workingman over a mug of beer: 'That's the way it is, my old mate: no man can flay a stone' [In Russian: Plet'yu obuha ne pereshibesh']". This story, though intended to be fictional, follows very closely the real story Yuri Orlov describes in his book (Orlov & Whitney, 1991). In 1956, he faced both the general meeting and a summons by the KGB for a friendly chat, where he was warned that if he continued his "anti-Soviet" activities, punitive measures would follow.

and entire scientific fields. Detailed discussion of this destruction is beyond the scope of this article, but the most prominent examples include genetics (Berg, 1983; Borinskaya et al., 2019), cybernetics (Gerovič, 2004), neurophysiology,[6] and experimental physics (Shifman, 2016).[7] The setbacks in these fields were so profound that certain areas of Soviet science never recovered. Similarly, the historical political abuse of psychiatry under totalitarian regimes, particularly in the People's Republic of China and Soviet Union,[8] has had lasting consequences that continue to impede developments in these countries (Su et al., 2023; Van Voren, 2010; Yang, 2017).

Herbert et al. frame their commentary as a contribution to a polemic, entitling it ...*On the Debate over Free Speech, Inclusivity, and Academic Excellence*, but there can be no honest debate when one side is forced to suffer professional consequences for voicing its views. Indeed, the insistence that voicing contrary views should merit punishment is not an invitation to a debate, but a usurpation of one.

"Consequences Culture" Fosters Intellectual Dishonesty

Although it is well known that Hudlický's paper was deleted and its disappearance is mentioned in the *Chemical & Engineering News* piece that Herbert et al. cite (Howes, 2020), no mention of the deletion is made in their commentary. Instead, they downplay the event as a retraction, which would typically leave the paper accessible but labelled as retracted, with an accompanying notice. They then claim that the comparisons made between the "publisher's retraction of an ill-conceived opinion piece" and authoritarian measures typical of totalitarian regimes are "hyperbolic" (Herbert et al., 2022). But the paper was not retracted; it simply disappeared from one day to the next, and was subsequently criticised in the official scientific press (see Howes, 2020, which also recounts the official statements of various learned societies on the subject), and since editors and reviewers suffered professional consequences, those actions are not "nothing at all like the actions of a totalitarian government" (Herbert et al., 2022): they resemble the authoritarian measures of totalitarian societies.

Hudlický's is not the only case of "consequences culture". This phenomenon is becoming pervasive in modern Western societies. Numerous academics across various fields in the USA (Abbot, 2021; Hooven, 2023; Lyons, 2022), Canada (CBC News, 2022; Howard-Hassmann, 2022), Germany (Sibarium, 2022), the UK (Adams, 2021; Gibbons, 2021), and New Zealand (Clements et al., 2021; Coyne, 2021a; Leahy, 2021)

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[6] The infamous August 1948 session of VASKhNIL (All-Union Academy of Agricultural Sciences named after V. I. Lenin) that signaled the "final destruction" of Soviet genetics was followed by the so-called Pavlovian sessions of the 1950 and 1951 (link to the article; accessed 4 September 2022). Those sessions resulted in several prominent Soviet neurophysiologists and psychiatrists being fired, exiled, or forced into retirement, effectively halting the work in these fields in the USSR. One of those attacked was Lina Stern – the first female member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences (1939), the first female professor of the University of Geneva (1918), the founder of the Institute of Physiology in Moscow, and the pioneer of the blood-brain barrier research (link to the article; accessed 4 September 2022). By the time the Pavlovian sessions took place, she had already been arrested in connection with her membership of the Jewish Antifascist Committee. She survived and was rehabilitated after Stalin's death. Further reading: Igual (2017) and Vein (2008) mention the Pavlovian sessions. The Pavlovian sessions are also briefly mentioned by Graham & Graham (1987).

[7] See note 3.

[8] See note 12.

have been subjected to mistreatment after running afoul of activism of one kind or another. Between 2014 and 2023, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), logged more than 1,700 attempts to deplatform or discipline faculty for speech that should have been protected by academic freedom (FIRE, n.d.-a, n.d.-b), with incidents occurring at an increasing rate (Flaherty, 2021). Several other online databases have also been compiled (Acevedo, 2023; Cancel Culture Database, 2025). Looking into these cases, one finds that in many instances, the views expressed were neither extreme (Danagoulian, 2021; Howard-Hassmann, 2022), nor factually incorrect. In fact, some simply challenged questionable science or policy, or defended science from an assault by pseudoscience (Coyne, 2021a). For example, a medical student was expelled and forced to "seek psychological services" for challenging the validity of microaggressions (Cantu & Jussim, 2021; Hudson, 2021). Indeed, the problem is not limited to academia: those same regressive authoritarian tendencies are evident in other strata of Western society (Applebaum, 2021; Tabarovsky, 2020), as are attempts to deny their existence or minimise their dangers (Young, 2021).

At one point Herbert et al. (2022) stated that "… we should not ignore or discount lived experience and perspectives that differ from the mainstream." They then turn around and dismiss the arguments of those whose lived experiences disagree with their narrative as being not just "hyperbolic", but also "dramatizing" and guilty of "rhetorical overreach" (Herbert et al., 2022). What reasons are there to give credence to some lived experiences but not others? What reasons are there to dismiss the lived experience of Tomáš Hudlický, who fled communist Czechoslovakia to pursue educational opportunities he was denied at home (Hudlický, 2011)? Herbert et al. (2022) neither answered this question or recognized its pertinence, nor even acknowledged its existence. Hudlický's situation is one that those who grew up in the former Eastern Bloc understand all too well: educational opportunities there were either strictly rationed or entirely denied to members of certain groups (Jews, religious people, dissidents and their children, children of the enemies of the people, and so on). It was common for examinations to be arranged with the sole purpose of failing members of those groups (Khovanova & Radul, 2011; Schulman & Hsieh, 2021; Shifman, 2005). The closest analogies to this situation in modern Western society date back to the times of official quotas against Jews in the first half of the 20th century, and to the times of blanket denial of admission to higher educational institutions of women and African Americans – until, that is, recent cases of discrimination against Asian students (Arcidiacono, 2018; Chung & Hurley, 2022).

Just as Herbert et al. selectively dismiss some lived experiences, they overlook historical facts that complicate their narrative. They claim, for instance, that the "gentlemen of the Royal Society" of London 150 years ago "could not imagine that Asians, African-Americans, Jews, Arabs, women, or LGBTQIA+ individuals would find a place among them" (Herbert et al., 2022), despite there being clear, albeit rare, examples that they *did* imagine such individuals. They elected Arab and Jewish members as far back as 1682 (Turkmani, 2011) and 1727 (Samuda, n.d.; Vieira, 2014), respectively, had at least one member who in 1781 admitted to being gay (Namier & Brooke, 1964; Onslow, n.d.), and elected Ardaseer Cursetjee, a marine engineer from Bombay, as a fellow in 1841 (Cursetjee, n.d.). The Royal Society counted pioneering women such as Margaret Cavendish among its speakers (1667; Wilkins, 2014) and Caroline Herschel (1750–1848) among the authors of its *Philosophical Transactions* (Herschel, 1787, 1794, 1796; Royal Society, 2017). A Jamaican mathematician, Francis Williams, was admitted

to the meetings of the Royal Society, and, highlighting the importance of dissenting voices in attempting to overturn the status quo, he was proposed as a fellow of the Royal Society in 1721 – against a majority that rejected him on the basis of race ("on account of his complection [*sic*]"; Carretta, 2003; Williams, 1997).

Similarly, what reasons are there for dismissing the lived experiences of Rima Azar and another, unnamed immigrant, both of whom went to Canada in search of freedom after leaving authoritarian regimes in their home countries, only to suffer "consequences", in the form of dismissal or expulsion, for exercising that freedom (Howard-Hassmann, 2022)? No reason is offered for excluding these people or their voices, beyond their disagreement with the position of the advocates of "consequences culture". Therefore, when "consequences culture" advocates speak of "inclusion" (Herbert et al., 2022), they are referring exclusively to data, ideas, opinions, and words that align with their narrative, and to those individuals who agree with that narrative. When they speak of a "just and equitable" scientific community, they refer to justice and equity exclusively for themselves and their allies. When they speak of "evolution" and "progress", they aspire to a society where anyone with a dissenting view is forced to suffer the consequences for expressing it. Such one-sided narratives are not only undemocratic – they are profoundly unscientific.

Being a scientist comes with a responsibility for one's words and actions. To help us shoulder that responsibility, we learn the rules of good scientific practice early on. Those rules include striving for objectivity, impartiality, and honesty in performing research and communicating its results; and evaluating arguments based on their merit and discarding hypotheses that are refuted by facts. What they do not include is omitting information that weakens our arguments, distorting facts to fit our preferred narrative, or expunging from the record data or views that challenge our hypotheses or otherwise offend our sensibilities. We learn that the kind of "scholarship" that advocates deletions, omissions, distortions, manipulations, and other violations of good scientific practice is characteristic of intellectual dishonesty that has no place in scholarly contributions. Herbert et al. claim that our scholarly community is undergoing an "evolution" towards "… a more just and equitable – and hence more excellent – scientific community" (Herbert et al., 2022), where condemnation by groups of social media activists is an appropriate form of evaluation, in opposition to, say, merit-based peer review. In other words, their view of a "just and equitable … scientific community" is one where standards and values are defined by activists who impose them on the rest of the community through *consequences*. Such attempts to reform scientific practices to accommodate ideology and activism based on notions of equality and social justice "for the good of the society" have been made in the past. Those attempts also rested on the practice of stifling dissent by imposing *consequences*, and they left nothing but ruins of what were vibrant and flourishing scientific communities in Russia and in Germany.

In view of the distortions, omissions, and exclusion of contrary arguments and voices, the framing by Herbert et al. of their commentary as a scholarly contribution to an ongoing debate is questionable at best and, at worst, an erosion of scientific and liberal democratic norms of an open society. "Do our core values include only the pursuit of facts and inventions, to the exclusion of other considerations?" (Herbert et al., 2022), ask the authors, while misrepresenting the deletion of Hudlický's paper, neglecting to mention the professional consequences suffered by those who dared to challenge their preferred narrative; they admonish "opponents of diversity initiatives" for refusing "to acknowledge the role of implicit bias" (Herbert et al., 2022), while ignoring the growing

recognition among social scientists that most of the famous claims about implicit bias have, after 25 years of research, proven themselves to be unfounded or dubious at best (Corneille & Hütter, 2020; Jussim, 2022; Jussim et al., 2025; Machery, 2022; Schimmack, 2021). The real questions, then, are not whether "other considerations are excluded", but (i) whether facts still matter at all, or whether "other considerations" have eclipsed the need to ground ourselves in objective reality, and (ii) which of the "other considerations" are excluded (the ones that are not consistent with the preferred narrative). This is precisely what happens when open and honest debate is shut down with threats and intimidation: whatever discussion that remains becomes untethered from reality. The consequence of "consequences culture" is intellectual dishonesty.

Historical Context

The comparisons between "consequences culture" and the authoritarian measures adopted by the totalitarian regimes of the USSR and Nazi Germany are often said to be unfair. Indeed, mentioning the USSR conjures up gruesome images of sailors with red armbands breaking down doors, raping aristocratic women, executing men in front of – or together with – their children, and the dread of the "Black Ravens".[9] However, such images represent the early days of the revolution and the era of Stalin. They are typically the stuff of movies, books, and, for some, stories narrated by grand- or even great-grandparents. In the later years of the USSR, arrests as professional consequences were becoming comparatively rare; executions, rarer still.[10] In the times to which most of those living and working today bear witness, dissent was dealt with through less violent measures such as dismissal, promotion denial, expulsion from learned societies, committees, or educational institutions, admission quotas, and ostracism – in other words, through the very hallmarks of the "consequences culture" for which Herbert et al. advocate in their commentary. Those measures, much like the arrests and executions of the earlier Soviet days, were implemented by people who had the power to do so, and who felt they had the right. This is also what the "consequences culture" argument of Herbert et al. boils down to: a narrative enforced by one group onto the rest of us; censorship in all its authoritarian glory. It is not (yet) censorship by the state or a dictator, but by peers – a form of censorship identified by John Stuart Mill in 1859 as the gravest threat to liberty (Mill, 2002) – and which was another characteristic of Soviet society (Tabarovsky, 2020, 2021).[11] As history has shown, in order for a top-down dictatorship to evolve in the first place, the future dictator needs to rally the masses for support. Initially, the support

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[9] Black Ravens, also called Black Marias, were the cars used by NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs of the USSR) for making arrests and transporting prisoners; immortalised in the poem *Requiem* by Anna Akhmatova (2014, p. 386)

[10] Orlov & Whitney (1991) speak of "thousands of political prisoners" who started being released in 1987; Bukovskiĭ & Kojevnikov (2019) state, quoting Yuri Andropov (Chairman of the KGB, 1967–82; General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, 1982–84), that "905 individuals were convicted [of anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda] between 1977 and 1987", down from "3448 from 1958 to 1967". Lev Landau, who was arrested in connection with the UPTI affair, a series of repressions of physicists in the Soviet Union during Stalin's purges, pointed out to Orlov that in Stalin's times, "…people were grabbed by chance. Now it's different, you could have predicted the consequences [of your actions]." To learn more about the UPTI affair, take a look at Shifman (2016).

[11] See notes 3, 4 and 5.

might be limited to a small group of vocal activists who lead the authoritarian charge that erodes the existing order. Threats of consequences for those who dissent serve to suppress opposition, polarising the conversation in favour of the new order. If authoritarian tendencies are left unchecked, the process can culminate in full-fledged dictatorship, as 20th-century history has shown.

A similarly delicate topic to bring up is that of Nazi Germany, especially when one of the co-authors of Herbert et al., Roald Hoffmann, is a Holocaust survivor (Hoffmann, 1981). Yet, it is a historical fact that the worst of Nazi atrocities were preceded by a decade-long process of dividing German science into "Jewish" and "Aryan", championed, in particular, by Johannes Stark and Philipp Lenard, and by the dismissal of Jewish academics from their posts and scholarly societies (Klemperer, 1998; Wachsmann, 2025; Walker, 1995). This process was met with enthusiasm by a significant part of the German scholarly community. Notably, in his 1934 Letter to the editor of *Nature*, Stark argued that the "Measures, brought in by the National-Socialist government [against the Jewish scientists] are due only to the attempt to curtail the unjustifiable great influence exercised by the Jews" (Stark, 1934). Here, he asserted the language of social justice and invoked the myths of Jewish power and privilege that we continue to face today (Schoenbergh, 2020; Stephens, 2022). Particularly ominous in this context are the remarks Mathias Micheel made in his piece *The Myth of Cancel Culture in Chemistry (and Science)* regarding the members of the German Chemical Society who hold opinions that, as he claims, do not reflect his own: "I think it would be in the best interest of the organization to tell these members: 'We do not care about you. If we cannot even agree on the very basics of how to do science, then we have no basis for future cooperation." (Micheel, 2022).

Ovens and gulags, arrests, executions, and punitive mental hospitalisations[12] are not the causes of authoritarianism, but its consequences. From the Holy Inquisition to the Nazis and the Bolsheviks, the notion that dissent should be punished ("suffer the consequences") emerged because some members of society ordained themselves as arbiters of truth and morality, of right and wrong. But the idea that one is in possession of the ultimate truth and knows where the "right side of history" is, that one has all the answers and that dissent should not only be silenced but punished ("consequences"), is not a characteristic of a scientist – it is the hallmark of a charlatan and a despot lacking intellectual humility. The Soviet agronomist and biologist Lysenko was fudging his results while denigrating real scientists, such as Mendel and Darwin, as "racist" or associated with Nazism and eugenics: "Mendelism-Morganism, Weissmanist neo-Darwinism...are not developed in Western capitalist countries for the purposes of agriculture, but rather serve reactionary purposes of eugenics, racism, etc. There is no relationship between agricultural practices and the theory of bourgeois genetics" (Borinskaya et al., 2019; Vavilov, 2004).

Once again echoing Soviet history, this narrative has recently been repeated in an article by M. R. McLemore (2021) in *Scientific American*. McLermore's article is

[12] Thanks in large part to the efforts of Vladimir Bukovskiĭ, a dissident, a political prisoner and a writer (Bukovskiĭ, 1979; Bukovskiĭ & Kojevnikov, 2019), the abuses of psychiatry for taming dissidents in the former USSR became so well-known that the Soviets were forced to resign from the World Psychiatric Association in 1983 under the threat of expulsion: link to the article; accessed 15 August 2022. This could have counted as just another "rhetorical device", if not for the story of the medical student, mentioned above, forced to "seek psychological services" (Hudson, 2021).

flawed in a number of ways (Coyne, 2021b), but here we note how Herbert et al. deny in no uncertain terms that the editors of the Royal Society of Chemistry are on a slippery slope towards prohibiting terms such as "normal distribution". What they call "simply rhetorical overreach" (Herbert et al., 2022) turns out to be exactly the opposite. As McLermore writes, "... the so-called normal distribution of statistics assumes that there are default humans who serve as the standard that the rest of us can be accurately measured against," and is "a hallmark of inadequate scientific methods based on theoretical underpinnings of a superior subject and an inferior one" (McLemore, 2021). This, of course, is incorrect: a normal distribution is a mathematical function that does not involve any such standard or reference to be "measured against". That function describes variations in real-world phenomena involving random and independent processes. There are many examples of such natural phenomena (Coyne, 2022). More generally, current language policing trends are alarming. They are steadily permeating technical (Krauss, 2022) and academic (Banik et al., 2020) worlds. For example, The Royal Society of Chemistry journals have now classified as inappropriate "Any content that could reasonably offend someone on the basis of their… religious or political beliefs" (RSC, 2024). Events like the stabbing of Salman Rushdie remind us that the dangers of going down this path are very much real, rather than merely rhetorical (Murphy et al., 2022; Schuessler, 2022).

The perils of assuming the position of self-ordained moral arbiters entitled to dispense punishment should be clear from these historical examples. Yet, under the guise of progressive policies, we are witnessing a re-emergence of attempts to stifle dissent and shut down debate on a wide range of topics that are critical to the continued progress of science and technology in the democratic world. As in the past, these attempts rely on the flawed authoritarian policies of censorship, loyalty oaths (FIRE, 2020; Thompson, 2019) and allyship, coercion and intimidation to enforce political activism. If Herbert et al. do not wish to have their rhetoric and actions compared to that of totalitarian societies, they should avoid behaving in the authoritarian manner characteristic of those societies. In the atmosphere of "Reasoned debate over how the politics and social discourse of this moment should influence our work" (Herbert et al., 2022), it should be acceptable to challenge, without fear of reprisals, prevailing narratives on a range of issues, such as institutional racism, implicit bias, selection based on ideology and identity instead of merit that leads to discrimination in admission policies, notions of privilege and overrepresentation that manifest themselves in anti-Asian and antisemitic sentiments (Reviakine, 2022a, 2022b), land acknowledgments, the morality and the enforced support for political aims and movements, the politicisation of science (Krylov, 2021), and any other subject deemed relevant in today's academic world.

Numerous examples could be brought up to illustrate the importance of freedom to express contrary views; relevant to the subject of inclusion are David Hilbert's famous attempts to bring Emmy Noether onto the faculty at the University of Göttingen against the opposition of the majority of the faculty (Michael, 2013) and the proposal to elect Francis Williams as a fellow of the Royal Society in 1721, mentioned above (Williams, 1997). It could be argued that social and scientific progress depend on singular ideas and on individuals who use rationality and reason to overturn accepted norms, popular misconceptions, and established theories (Flexner & Dijkgraaf, 1939/2017). Such progress can only be fostered by the atmosphere of openness that has, until now, been accepted in democratic societies, where dissent cannot be silenced by an oppressive

majority, or by a vocal minority. Only if we continue to engage in an open debate on a wide range of factual issues, a debate that is free of distortions and intimidation, can we make sure that our culture does not evolve into an authoritarian model that Herbert et al. appear to advocate by invoking the idea of "consequences culture".

Conclusion: The Future Is Now

The second half of the 20th century passed under the shadow of the Cold War. A competition between the democratic West and the totalitarian Eastern Bloc was palpable in every aspect of life – science, engineering, art, economics, the military. The Marxist ideology of enforced equalisation, of repression of minority views by governance through "democratic centralism", of a "consequence culture" that punished dissent, lost that competition. The principles of democracy, which recognised differences as a part of the normal interplay among humans, that rewarded skill, intellectual diversity, inventiveness, and effort, thankfully prevailed.

So far, in the West, we are still living in a society that by and large recognises dissent as healthy, where it is still understood by many that scientific progress is predicated on open debate unfettered by ideology, identity, or political affiliations, where it is still acceptable to challenge the prevailing narratives and question policies, as well as the validity of research underlying those policies, even when these policies are called "progressive". But what will the science, and the society, of tomorrow look like? Will our scientific journals and professional societies succumb to ideology and activism, and follow the Soviet totalitarian model? Or will we continue adhering to the principles of ever-evolving knowledge, and reward those who are motivated by a quest for discovery and a desire for innovation? These ideals are predicated on openness, on commitment to the free exchange of ideas, on intellectual humility and willingness to be proven wrong, together with respect for and acceptance of our differences – in short, *on the inclusion of diverse points of view, constrained only by facts and adherence to the scientific method for interpreting those facts.* There is little worse for a scientist than to become party to the implementation of policies based on pseudoscience developed for ideological purposes.

We have two choices. For scientists, those choices are simple. The first is whether to do honest science to the best of our abilities and help others to do the same, or to make science subservient to ideological goals which permit falsehoods as long as they serve the agenda. The second choice is whether to speak up when one sees a falsehood, because, as the epigraph to this article states, "Every lie we tell incurs a debt to the truth. Sooner or later, that debt is paid". The idea, that voicing one's views merits punishment is untenable, and needs to be scrapped. Similarly, the politicisation of science needs to stop.

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