

Is a science critic a thug?

Jacques Testart

Abstract

After being cosseted by the media for what they incorrectly considered to be a scientific feat, the author found himself widely boycotted by the more “responsible” media. The reason for this was his critical view of the evolution of science, which he felt had become a tool at the service of innovation, and, therefore, of industrial interests. The traditional image of science, which serves to help us to understand the world, still persists despite being perverted by commercial interests, because it is defended by naive people as well as by lobbies, themselves responsible for this debasement. Thus, the “militant” scientist is suspected of dishonourable behaviour and finds himself expelled from the “scientific community”, forced to express himself from the margins. As a result, a parallel world of information and debate is created, which presents truths different from those of the mainstream institutions.

For many years, I believed that “militants” were anarchists or often violent luddites, but my own difficulty in communicating my ideas in the press led me to understand that this description actually applied to my modest self. Indeed, surprised and annoyed by a refusal by most leading newspapers over the past ten years to publish my work, the same ones which used to hound me, I sought to try to understand the reason for this ostracism. A journalist from *Le Monde* was willing to enlighten me, explaining that editors viewed me as a militant — apparently a good enough reason for exclusion by any media eager to protect its reputation. When, in 1986, I raised the alarm about the eugenics risk of sorting embryos conceived through *in vitro* fertilisation [Testart, 1986], *Le Monde* granted me its front page and remained very open to my ideas for many years. How did such a distinguished whistleblower become a dangerous militant? Apart from the conversion of many media, including *Le Monde*, to the neo-liberal order, which is not very open to criticism of competitive performance, my media image had suffered from having taken my beliefs too far. The final straw came with the launch of my website in 2007, in which I revealed my qualities as a “science critic”,¹ a claim viewed by most researchers and science organisations (communication, institutions) as a provocation. Despite many mishaps over the years, science is still deemed to be a neutral activity, something which is not open to being analysed, except by its own experts and only then from a professional viewpoint in terms of “good practices”.

¹<http://jacques.testart.free.fr/>.

As a result, any attempt to challenge the untouchable status of Science can only be the work of a thug or an obscurantist. I have been described as both.

Western science constitutes exceptional knowledge/power owing to its rational protocol for the permanent acquisition of data. Nobody can seriously deny the contribution it has made to our civilisations and to our understanding of the world. Yet, from a rational point of view, a scientific one, it is difficult to defend science without criticising it. Especially so, when it becomes obvious that the wonderful process of discovering and understanding the world has become almost completely overtaken by a utilitarian desire for control and commercial interests ever since science became a technoscience. Many researchers, surprised to find themselves challenged since they are only fulfilling their mission to research, publish and patent, declare that: “society is free to accept or reject my results!” However, they forget that these results, largely financed by tax-payers’ money, are now almost always a product of work which is targeted from the outset, and concern subjects about which citizens could have been consulted upstream.² Thus, a critique of science highlights the indifference which most scientists have to the economic, ecological or ethical effects of their activities, as well as the condescension with which they view the population, whom they consider to be incapable of understanding or passing judgement on scientific, or rather, technoscientific, activity. Being a researcher should not prevent you from being a citizen, and, therefore, being responsible for the consequences of your acts.

You may wonder why technoscience is so keen to be seen as “science”, and specialists, experts in almost nothing, so keen to be seen as “scholars”. In reality, this disguise helps to protect the world of research from prying eyes. The aim is not to protect laboratory secrets but to use the prestigious image of Science to avoid questions about the actual legitimacy of research. As a result, scientific research is one of the few activities in industrialised societies which does not take account of, or even seek to understand, the opinion of the citizens who finance it. Yet, populations may have other priorities which they would like to suggest and which may differ from those more adapted to economic growth, or they may wish to challenge the gradual drifting of the technoscientific system towards proposals which go against their own interests. It is time to question what authentic progress actually means; progress which spares natural resources, which does not cause significant pollution, which advances with caution, which creates or respects conviviality, in short, which improves the life of humans without harming the planet and living beings. Populations should make these choices rather than scientists, even if they are “experts”, and procedures should be validated so that citizens really do make a decision for the common good [Testart, 2015].

In the *Alliage* review, I was able to recount my personal experience of science.

“A young science enthusiast — in the sense that I was interested in the product of human intelligence — an unusual education turned me into a — still — amateur scientist in that I was outside of the box, the clan, and epistemic methods. I played around with pieces of science, relying on intuition rather than knowledge. An idea hunter, a juggler of correlations, a contemplator of simplistic self-evident facts, a dabbler in complexity, a sort of instinctive caution protected me from single-minded

²<http://sciencescitoyennes.org/rubrique/democratisation-de-la-science/convention-de-citoyens/>.

and stumbling specialists. I moved a great deal from laboratory to laboratory and often encountered the success deserved by daring work in the field.

By dint of playing around with science, I grew to admire artisans, farmers and all those who understand that we do not actually know very much, but that, already, is quite a lot. I professed that it was necessary to pay attention to changing winds and wishes, to the lessons of nature, to beware of what you cannot see, molecules, atoms or genes, to observe living things and continue to preserve a child's spirit, imagine that truths can be found in harmony.

So I learned to disavow the machine which employs researchers, those who impose the monstrous rules of competition rather than focus on competence, those who advise following the interests of their caste or their company, those who make decisions in the belief that they know, those who hide behind the armour of their beliefs, and those who shamelessly trade all laboratory productions. Not to mention those, who, at the service of all that has come before, hide behind democracy by asking for the opinion of citizens once everything has already been played out, discovered, packaged and sold. [Testart, 2011]

That is how I became a militant (activist?) with an association which offers, without really believing it too much, to bring democracy to science.³ There are many, especially in the academic world, who look down on militants of associations, even when their findings prove to be right, contrary to those of the establishment (pollution of France by the radioactive cloud from Chernobyl, or pollution of crops, especially genetically modified, by pesticides, etc.), or when they pass on a scientific truth which is denied by the institution (danger of asbestos and mobile telephones, etc.). Researchers only tolerate the contributions of militants if they serve their own work (treatments for AIDS or the evaluation of biodiversity), and, unfairly refer to “participatory research”, something which, in actual fact, is no more than extra pairs of hands subject to the implementation of their protocols, greatly welcome during these times of budgetary restrictions. It is agreed that the presentation of scientific facts is a coded activity, accepted as being objective and free of any sort of pollution such as errors or lies. On the contrary, the argument of the critical militant is accused of promoting an opinion rather than announcing the Truth. This image deserves analysis: there are many good reasons to challenge laboratory truths! The myth of “neutral science” becomes more difficult to believe when science is marketed as a technoscience to be consumed. Although error is an inevitable risk, lies add to the problem when it becomes necessary to honour a contract or obtain a financial reprieve. For some major forgers who have been uncovered, such as the Korean human cloner (whose accuser, the American R Lanza was also found to be the author of misleading articles), or Sir Richard Doll, a scientific “specialist” for Monsanto until his death at the age of 92 years, there were how many small deals following disappointing results, intentional oversights in order not to risk contradicting a conclusion, selective demonstrations which deliberately ignored the complex reality, public declarations which complied with the politically correct solution? The Chinese are much more realistic: in order to combat fraud, the necessary consequence of competitive growth, a law of 2007 authorises researchers to not find!

³<http://sciencescitoyennes.org>.

The militant's work is necessarily focused on demonstrating what he believes to be good for society. That is why he makes choices between various arguments and takes shortcuts in order to reach conclusions which he believes to be obvious by caricaturing facts so as to be more certain of attracting approval. The militant's vocation is to exaggerate, as the researcher often does out of necessity, but which one tricks the population the most? The important thing for getting close to the truth is the confrontation between each view and contradictory view. Yet, this opportunity for contradiction is largely limited to the authorised and closed circle of experts for the scientific view, while the activist of a cause always finds himself, in full view of society, up against other militants who hold a different view.

What is unique about the science critic⁴ is his wish to understand and reveal the mechanisms which are common to the undesirable developments of science when it serves specific interests or ideology without being shared. By demystifying science, the science critic allows citizens to develop the courage needed to be able to pass judgement on institutions and their productions. That way, he works to ensure that technoscience is a democratic process.

The scenario which we are advocating, with the Fondation Sciences Citoyennes, is that of a strong alliance between researchers and civil society. The idea is to transform orientations, decision-making methods, expertise practices and the relationships between research and society.

The finalised research activity should become a genuine public service where citizens indicate the orientations they wish to see. The Anthropocene, the most visible effects of which are climate change, loss of biodiversity or chemical pollution, support the urgent need for change: men and women, whether scientists or not, will be required to accept the new and exciting challenge of cooperating with the planet for the common good. After several decades of self-deprecating their function at the service of markets, researchers will, at long last, be able to re-engage with their profession and place themselves (once again) at the service of the citizens of the world.

Why is it so difficult to communicate on these points which, themselves, appear to be so obvious? Why are the media, who are so open to the demagogy of lobbies, almost completely deaf to the pleas of militants? Those who resist a single-minded approach find themselves sidelined by the masters of the world: a parallel world of information/communication is being built on the Web and through civil society networks.

Translated by Laura Robertson

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⁴<http://sciences-critiques.fr>.

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How to cite

Testart, J. (2015). 'Is a science critic a thug?'. *JCOM* 14 (02), C06_en.



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ISSN 1824 – 2049. Published by SISSA Medialab. <http://jcom.sissa.it/>.