
HUNTING THE SNARK: SCIENCE AND POLITICS

JOHANNES BORGSTEIN
LOUW FEENSTRA

...by the start of this millennium
Capitalism was the world,
it took the world with it.

"The second fall," Anatol Lieven.

The intermingling of science and politics with liberal capitalism effectively signals the end for both science and politics in the form we have known them.

Anatol Lieven stated in a futuristic essay (really a science-fiction short story) written well before 9/11, that a combination of democracy and liberal capitalism would destroy everything (*Prospect*, January 20, 2001).

The 'free market' antiregulatory think-tanks were originally developed by the tobacco industry, but soon found far more lucrative work for the oil industry and its spinoffs. They have now graduated to mainstream politics, and are manipulating the democratic processes across the globe.

Cherry picking research results to systematically sow doubt where none existed, distorting not only scientific findings but the very basis of science, and repeating endlessly the truism that *absence of proof is proof of absence*.

1. THE POLITICS IN SCIENCE

The quest for the unknown was never more clearly depicted than in *The Hunting of the Snark*, Lewis Carroll's whimsical poem about a diverse group of characters under the leadership of the Bellman who travel forth to hunt a creature none of them has ever seen. The poem is often mistaken for a children's book, but like his better-known works about Alice's adventures, it is really complex adult literature filled with subtle jokes and hidden meanings, and like all good literature, readable at many levels of interpretation. The Bellman is in charge of the mission and has supplied the company with a map to finding the *Snark*, a mysterious and mythical beast that is never clearly defined. This map depicts a completely blank ocean, for the Bellman is clearly in favour of a completely unbiased search.

Department of Neuroscience, Erasmus University Medical Center, Rotterdam, The Netherlands. / L.Feenstra@erasmusmc.nl
Hospital Tergooi Blaricum, Netherlands. / borgstein@me.com

The poem provides an eerily accurate description of many of the academic departments we have had the privilege of working in over the past years.

The professor or department head (sometimes simply know as 'chair') often has as varied a team as the Bellman could wish for, including various interns, residents, semiretired advisors (*famed for a number of things*), a financial controller, a coach or mediator (*to arrange their disputes*), technicians (*of immense skill*) and the hard-working departmental secretary (the *beaver*, though Carroll could not have foreseen other more recently acquired meanings that make this interpretation a little awkward and politically incorrect in this context) who on occasion may also develop an amorous relationship with a member of staff.

Inevitably, since we have worked mostly in surgical departments, there will be a surgeon (the *butcher*), though in other departments this role is taken over by the financial controller... who symbolically hacks into and cuts up the budget.

The Bellman has his vision of the Snark and is careful to relentlessly repeat his observations and theories about where this creature might be found, for it is well known that a theory repeated often enough becomes indistinguishable from reality:

*Just the place for a Snark! I have said it twice:
That alone should encourage the crew.
Just the place for a Snark! I have said it thrice:
What I tell you three times is true*

Research methods also are carefully described:

*They sought it with thimbles, they sought it with care;
They pursued it with forks and hope;
They threatened its life with a railway-share;
They charmed it with smiles and soap*

We do not want to spoil the ending for you, but in the search for the Snark they first accidentally encounter a *Jubjub* (undoubtedly an obscure scientific acronym) in a classic case of serendipity; an exciting unexpected new finding is made while looking for something else entirely. This may perhaps be attributed to the rudder and bowsprit of the vessel occasionally becoming mixed up in a classic '*Post hoc ergo propter hoc*' fallacy, where the cause and effect of a phenomenon are unwittingly interchanged. In fitting academic style they even write up their findings applying liberal doses of mathematics and statistics. When they finally think they have found the real Snark they discover it is really something entirely different and far more dangerous than they had anticipated; nothing less than the dreaded *Boojun*—may atomic scientists will recognise the feeling. In good academic

fashion several of the team members maintain they had already anticipated this.

The Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, mathematician and amateur philosopher, may have anticipated modern scientific research by one hundred and fifty years. ‘Amateur philosopher’ is not meant as a dispeccative term—Conrad Lorenz claimed that only amateur scientists were ever likely to make important discoveries—for professionals have too much to lose, too many vested interests, and rarely take the risk of an unusual theory. There is a marvellous (and almost certainly untrue) anecdote about Nils Bohr who managed to create an exceptionally open and creative setting in his Copenhagen laboratory at a time of much debate on the nature of quantum theory. When confronted by a junior colleague proposing an unusual new theory, Bohr replied: “We are all agreed that your theory is crazy. The question that divides us is whether it is crazy enough to have a chance of being correct. My own feeling is that it is not crazy enough.” But then Bohr was an exception to the rule, and was quite prepared to consider crazy theories other than his own. There is another anecdote about Bohr and the barometer circulating on the internet that is also untrue, yet it demonstrates his unusual scientific creativity, or that of the unknown writer.

Science has never dealt in certainty or belief—only in confirming or denying the best case hypothesis until a better explanation comes along.

2. THE SCIENCE IN POLITICS

Science and politics have always been intertwined, and though scientists try to hide in their ivory tower, the shortage of ivory ensures that they are increasingly involved in politics.

Scientific discoveries quickly make headlines, the significance often distorted out of all proportion, and the responsible scientist, however modest he may have been, quickly starts to believe the media hype, until he is quickly dethroned by the next ‘breakthrough.’

Anyhow, the real problem is the research that is rarely popularised; the social and psychological research that studies our subconscious motivation, and how to effectively manipulate this.

Driven and paid originally by the consumer society to increase sales, this branch of research has gradually been taken over by politics. Assisted by the internet social media giants, politicians are increasingly aware of the effectiveness of social manipulation techniques.

Science in effect has managed to implement the end of politics. In the sphere of effective subconscious emotional manipulation, rational argument and debate makes no further sense. Truth and lies become deliber-

ately intertwined to add to the confusion and prevent rational analysis of any given situation.

Social control has been optimised by social media to a level only dreamed of by the dictators of oppressive regimes throughout history, and dissidence is easily suppressed.

There will be no possibility of a new 'Arab spring', for all dictators and would be dictators invest heavily in internet control. In a world where all communications effectively run via the internet it is simply a matter of clamping the communication network, and vigorously pursuing the possible culprits (in real time). All old communications of all possible dissidents can be mined for politically incorrect comments, and there is little defence possible against a dictator's arbitrary definition of dissidence.

Only the poorest countries will have any semblance of freedom of speech for their rulers do not have the finances to pay for the manipulation and surveillance techniques, and must resort to old fashioned violence and genocide to impose terror and control. Wealthier countries can afford a more elegant form of suppression. Though the dissidents will still need to be incarcerated or executed.

The end of politics is scientific, just as the end of science is political, and both are subservient to the new global religion of liberal capitalism that takes neither very seriously.

In our search for the Snark we have unwittingly uncovered the Boojum, and there may be no way of getting it back in its cage.