



On the roller coaster from a postmodern, welfare-state society to freedom – A book review

Description

Michael Esfeld & Cristian Lopez: Restoring Science and the Rule of Law. Cham: Palgrave-macmillan/Springer. Palgrave Studies in Austrian Economics. 216 Seiten; CHF 142,00, eBook 114,00 CHF; ISBN 978-3-031-71185-5

Michael Esfeld is professor of science studies and the history of science with Lausanne University and the Swiss Technical University (EPFL) at Lausanne in Switzerland. He gained some fame, when he criticized the president of the time-honored academy Leopoldina, after it had produced a consensus statement backing the German government's corona regime. He thought this was scientific bogus, and said so publicly.

I have met him at various occasions, interviewed him and had some very fruitful discussions with him. Otherwise, I have no conflict of interest. His postdoc Cristian Lopez works with him in Lausanne. Together they have authored this thought-provoking book, which sends the reader on a roller-coaster ride.

On roller coasters, you suddenly plunge into the depths and think you are going to hit the ground before a sharp curve takes you back up. Then you feel the sharp wind, look down anxiously, until you finally end up through several curves, mountains and valleys where you knew you had to end up from the beginning. Only now you are richer by your experience. Reading this book is a bit like that. Its message can be summarized briefly, and the rollercoaster ride is ultimately its argumentative development over several stages.

The message is this:

Since the Enlightenment, science, especially natural science, has become a motor of liberation. At the same time, it has contributed to the replacement of absolutist political structures by republican-democratic ones, and thus the rule of law has been established. This is not to be confused with the political rule of a state. But now this very success of science has turned to the fact that, on the one hand, the state has become more and more powerful and now demands a mediator, regulator and guide. Science must now serve this purpose. On the other hand, science, especially in the public perception, has become so entrenched that it has degenerated into scientism, into a belief in science. This threatens both concerns of the Enlightenment, namely, the liberation of man from the constraints

of nature through good science and a liberal political structure. For the political structures have crippled themselves into a welfare state that exercises more and more domination and restricts more and more freedom. To justify this, it calls a warped science into the arena of political struggles to fight for it. Scientific scientism and political dirigisme thus go hand in hand. For reason and freedom fall by the wayside in both domains. And where reason is no longer the measure of research and action, ideologies take hold. Then a pseudoscience is used to justify a political agenda. Both support each other, and the whole thing ends in the forced beneficence of the modern welfare state. What is needed, therefore, is a new, proper Enlightenment that breaks open the narrowing of the first Enlightenment, removes the crippling of political structures, and thus liberates both science and society and, with it, economic forces.

This can be achieved by limiting science to its core competence. This is exclusively committed to the objective description of reality through perpetual critical discourse and critique of positive findings. It cannot and must not be used to justify political narratives because that contradicts its essence. After all, science never has a final answer, but only provisionally valid ones. Science by consensus, as it is increasingly being claimed in various subject areas, is always a self-contradiction. If science is left free from political paternalism, then science provides very useful insights, the utilization of which is then determined in a free society by free citizens who know how to use their own minds and are engaged in free discourse and exchange of goods. Furthermore, it is important to limit the community again to what it was intended for by the Enlightenment: as an institution that, through the rule of law, defines above all defensive rights. These are negative rights, in the face of an intrusive state and greedy neighbors. In such a view, positive rights, on the other hand, have little or nothing to do with it. Positive rights are those that the state takes upon itself to regulate coexistence beyond what is necessary, e.g. the right to collect taxes to finance state tasks and to redistribute wealth. Ultimately, the model proposed by Esfeld and Lopez amounts to an anarchistic solution to the Hobbesian dilemma.

As is well known, in his “Leviathan” of 1651, Hobbes formulated the dilemma of the modern state: the coexistence of people must be regulated, otherwise the law of the jungle is the consequence – one horn of the dilemma. Therefore, there must be an authority – the Leviathan, or the modern state, which ensures order. But once this power is installed, it can enact laws and do whatever it wants, thereby enslaving people more and more – the second horn of the dilemma. So, whatever you do, there will either be injustice or a lack of freedom.

Esfeld and Lopez resolve the dilemma by saying: we do not need a Leviathan, no central state power. We need a small-scale, democratic, relationship- and discourse-dependent legal structure that ensures that the natural rights of freedom that everyone has do not restrict the freedoms of others and do not lead to an arbitrary rule of the strong. The internal justification for this line of thought runs through the entire book: namely, recourse to reason and perhaps its most noble guarantor of enlightenment, to Kant. Kant had famously analyzed that in ethics and politics, man is to be seen as an end in himself and must never be understood as a means. The authors claim Kant’s transcendental point of view for their argument. This so-called transcendental standpoint means that consciousness and its inexplicable precondition has always been presupposed, whenever we do anything like thinking, planning or discussing.

From this idea it can be concluded that science is reduced to the rational analysis of observations and their critique. This is a mixture of Popperian fallibilism and Feyerabend’s methodological anarchy. And from this transcendental point of view, it can be deduced that no political theory and no ethics can define people, regardless of their nature, as a means to an end.

However, this is happening more and more frequently in recent times. Because of a rampant disease of the mind, which can be described as postmodernism, science, philosophy, politics and society are losing their connection to reality. It is no longer reality, but mere images, simulacra, that we deal with. But if reality is no longer our point of reference, then our actions are, to a certain extent, left to our own devices, or rather: then all possible political

narratives can grasp reality in their own particular perspective, taking science and social forces into their service in order to advance precisely those narratives and make them reality. This is exactly what is currently happening very often. The authors spell it out using three politically highly incorrect and therefore extremely exciting examples.

They show how this happened in the corona regime. How it happens in the climate narrative, and how it happens in the gender or political correctness or wokeness narrative. In each of these areas, separate narratives are at work that have relatively little to do with reality. Instead, they pick out one part of reality, ignore the rest, underline the isolated part very boldly in red and pink or green highlighter, and turn it into a distorted image of reality.

I am relatively familiar with one of these areas, the corona narrative, because I myself have written a number of original publications and followed the data quite closely. And I can report: Esfeld and Lopez are quite right. This strengthens my belief that the analysis of the other two areas is likely to be accurate as well. Not that they would dispute the fact that the climate is warming. But they point out that there are a great many components that affect this process and that singling out human CO₂ emissions has a certain arbitrariness. At the same time, our limited modeling capacity makes it necessary for us to simplify the models. However, it is precisely this fact, as in the modeling of corona courses, that causes the models to move away from reality. Esfeld and Lopez cite a whole range of data and findings that are overlooked in the mainstream narrative. They relativize the influence of human activity. After all, at the time of the Roman climate optimum between 50 BC and around 200 AD, the Earth's climate was about as warm as it is today, if not warmer, and at the end of the Neolithic period it was a few degrees warmer than today. These warming periods can hardly be explained by human CO₂ emissions. But what about the consensus expressed in organizations such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), or the WHO's pronouncements on health issues? Here, too, the authors point out interesting parallels: scientists who keep their noses to the wind and quickly smell which way it is blowing jump on a bandwagon that was set in motion by political interests, and others follow; money is made available; as a result, realities are created through research results whose direction has already been determined; anything that does not fit into this logic is discarded. It was similar with the corona regime: governments sought help from scientists who supported their view. Others were not given a voice or were relegated to the shadow world of irrelevance by the silence of the media. This creates the impression of unanimity and of a "scientific consensus". But this word alone is an absurdity. If there is anything in science that is constant, it is the continuous criticism of a supposed consensus or the advancement of insight through understanding previous mistakes. "Science progresses funeral by funeral" is a well-known English adage of a Planckian insight.

The authors use these three examples of false scientific consensus and distortion of the actual verifiable facts in the corona, climate and wokeness or gender regimes to illustrate how a science that has been bent into scientism, that panders to politics and is commandeered by it, damages both science and politics and ultimately restricts the freedoms of us all.

What must therefore be done? Science itself must be liberated, in the spirit of Popper and also Feyerabend, from false guidelines, guard rails and paternalism, including those that have since emerged from its own ranks. And politics must retreat to its core business, namely the minimal regulation of coexistence through the guarantee of negative rights, i.e. rights of defense against the restriction of one's own freedom and against encroachment on others.

This can be achieved by relying entirely on the libertarian tradition. It is represented by the Austrian authors Hayek, Mises, Hoppe and Rothbard. As far as I can see, their names do not have a good reputation in the left-liberal intellectual ranks of the feuilleton and philosophical departments. No wonder. Their message would lead to the disappearance of the money flows that support these groups. In the libertarian tradition, the state has only a minimal function. It would have to prove itself successful by regulated self-abolition; only then would it have a

right to exist, as paradoxical as that sounds.

If you think this libertarian-anarchist concept through to the end, then it might feel like you've taken a rollercoaster turn too fast, and you're flying out of the vehicle. The state funding of research – certainly all the gender, climate and political correctness research – would stop immediately. In such a model, there would be no provision for academics who cannot support themselves through their work because someone is interested in it and is willing to spend money on it. Large-scale collaborative projects such as the interferometers that have made it possible to measure gravitational waves and that are currently providing us with new insights into the cosmos on a weekly basis would no longer be financially viable. After all, who is going to come up with the approximately 30 million US dollars needed for maintenance if not the state? Perhaps a rich benefactor?

State-funded education, schools and universities would also not exist. It reminds me of the beginnings of the university in 12th-century Paris. Scholars settled there, opened their living rooms, taught, and whoever was interested came. The scholars received a small fee for their teaching, on which they lived (or rather not; in most cases, they probably still had a few clerical sinecures).

Could this concept be transported into the 21st century? Into an era in which physics or astrophysics is conducted with huge apparatuses that no private sponsor can pay for? Who knows, maybe a radical think tank would have to be set up that is completely privately funded and whose charter states that no substantive economic interests are associated with it other than the pure gain of knowledge. Perhaps such a group of radical thinkers would have to consider whether and how such concepts could be realized.

One thing is certain: such a group would have a powerful enemy, namely the clique of academic-political interests that thrive on the fact that our community is structured as it is. This is because it supports vast numbers of interest groups, and in this way buys power in the form of consent by serving separate interests.

In this sense, this work is a kind of utopia, similar to Thomas Moore's Utopia ("Ou-topia" is Greek for "non-place"). He described a world of the 16th century that did not exist in order to make the harsh, dirty, criminal world of his time a little more humane. In this, he has since been successful in some respects, as our world is somewhat more human, it seems. This book is a utopia for our time. It deserves to be taken very seriously, precisely because of its radicalism and perspective. Its goal is definitely selfless in the good sense. Its goal is freedom.

I hope the book finds many readers. That will only happen if it is published in a cheaper edition, and then thoroughly edited again. It is very annoying that a publisher like Springer, which demands exorbitant prices for books, edits so carelessly or not at all.

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