

Who Needs the Science Wars When You've Got This on the Homefront?

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There probably is not much more to say beyond this point because Eglash (2015) has shifted the original frame of reference too much. First of all, leave Voltaire out of it. I was not objecting to Eglash's right to say that Science and Technology Studies (STS) practitioners should speak against creationists (for whatever reason). I was not even objecting to any criticism he might have to my participation in the 2005 intelligent design (ID) trial (*Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District*). I was opposing a motion he placed before the STS membership that would have its would-be professional body, the Society for the Social Studies of Science (4S), come out against ID/creationism. Not only would this be out of character for 4S, which has refused all previous efforts at becoming 'professional' in any serious sense, but also the grounds that Eglash et al. offered for denouncing ID/creationism amounted simply to ID/creationists' having turned STS principles to their own advantage. When I said that Eglash et al. were 'out of their depth', I was referring specifically to this framing of their proposal—not to my superior erudition (blah, blah). Eglash et al. appear to have expected ID/creationists to be dumber than they turned out to be, or put another way, they were *prima facie* unwilling to extend to ID/creationists the same epistemic charity that they gladly extend to indigenous peoples.

Ignorance, Deception and What We Say

Eglash presents a litany of STS notables who have said things that would seem to support the proposal that he put before 4S. I do not take issue with this. I take issue with the content of what these people say. For example, Eglash refers to the famous Latour essay (2004) where he waved the white flag in the Science Wars, counselling STS to 'not passively lend itself to appropriation by groups that promote scepticism in science for socially detrimental purposes'. Sage advice? No, it is fatuous nonsense. First of all, insofar as STS has anything that can be called 'reliable methods', they will work no matter who uses them. However, if one does not like the politics of the user, then fight the political battle explicitly rather than try to restrict use of the STS methods. In practice, different people will fight different battles, since claims of 'socially detrimental purposes' are in the eye of the beholder, typically that of a critic. I really do not think that STS as a field can speak in one voice to this point.

In fact, I am a little surprised by the ease with which Eglash can say who is and is not 'deliberately producing ignorance and deception' in the various science-based public controversies of our time—especially if one factors in the more alarmist responses coming from the 'politically correct' side of these matters (e.g. Oreskes and Conway 2014). Here, I would have thought STS's vaunted open-mindedness in quickly changing socio-epistemic situations would come in very handy, as the various sides raise their game in the course of battle. That has certainly happened to the ID/creationists, who were already consulting the STS literature more than twenty years ago—but it seems to have taken Eglash et al. by surprise.

Unfortunately the people who seem not to have appreciated this are the politically correct vanguard of STS. I cringed when seeing that horrible quote from Donna Haraway, which

could have come out the New Atheist playbook: ‘teaching modern Christian creationism should be fought as a form of child abuse’ (1991, 151). What could possess Haraway to say such a thing? In any case, it might help if she looked at school policies, textbooks and classroom practices before issuing such anathema, especially since ID/creationists inconveniently tend to lay out evolutionary theory in some detail before challenging it.

Consensus and Dissent

Equally I am surprised that Naomi Oreskes has become an STS hero, given that during the Science Wars, views like hers were the very ones championed by the likes of Gross and Levitt. Her critique of the ‘merchants of doubt’ has been based on an idea that STS is normally seen as having long discredited; namely, that science tends towards consensus. On the contrary, STS teaches that consensus needs to be actively maintained—‘manufactured’ if you will—because otherwise dissent and dispersion rules. However, to her credit, [Oreskes \(2015\)](#) has drunk enough of the STS Kool-Aid to say something that Gross and Levitt would never say—that scientists should alter their conventions on statistical significance to be able to speak more confidently about the (allegedly) impending climate apocalypse.

Eglash is more interesting when he talks about his own positive project to integrate science into indigenous African curricula and related efforts by others to do the same with indigenous American curricula. In this context, the ID/creationism is a red herring and simply confuses his own message. As I understand it, Eglash is trying to persuade all parties that there is an elective affinity between certain features of indigenous knowledges and, say, the general tenor of contemporary evolutionary theory, both of which focus on bottom-up, emergent processes.

Capitalizing on this common metaphysical starting point can facilitate the learning of science by indigenous peoples. I am supportive of this general idea, and to be honest I am surprised that it is even controversial. However, as presented, the argument appears to be mainly pitched in terms of pedagogical value. But does such an approach go further and aspire to change the mainstream scientific research agenda—or does it simply provide reinforcement for it in a way that also satisfies groups who might be otherwise marginalized from science? The remaining fans of Gross and Levitt see this question for its true seriousness—[and in their benighted wisdom lump me and Kim TallBear on the same side](#) (*The Unz Review*, 26 January 2015)! The former option, which is the bolder one, is of course the one that frightens the Gross and Levitt groupies.

Universalism and Humanity

ID/creationism is a more serious threat to the scientific status quo than the indigenous knowledges that Eglash defends because it shares so many of science’s metaphysical assumptions (perhaps Eglash would agree on this point.) In particular, both are born of the same ‘universalist’ (aka imperial) mentality which claims that if something is knowledge then it is true for everyone, which in turn licenses proselytism, whether it comes from a missionary or Richard Dawkins. Darwin’s specifically non-teleological version of evolution turns out to be a problem for this vision because it severs the ‘image

and likeness of God' idea that historically gave dissenting Christians the confidence that they could fathom the mind of God for themselves through science rather than relying on clerical authority (an idea that ID/creationists now extend to scientific authority itself).

Eglash's references to 'top-down' and 'perfection' are simply clichés that do not capture the complexity of what is going on here. A deep question exists as to why would anyone think it reasonable to try to understand reality as a coherent rational whole. Science is predicated on the radical intelligibility of the universe (i.e. in principle we could know everything if just try hard enough). This striving is historically due to the special role of humans in the Abrahamic religions, [and as I have argued here](#) (*iai news*, 16 February 2015), we do not live in a world where that sentiment can be taken for granted anymore.

Finally, it is often forgotten that the public understanding of the options available for resolving the evolution-creation controversy is more limited today than it was even fifty years ago. Nowadays, one can either follow Richard Dawkins and claim that evolution renders any sense of creation redundant, or follow Stephen Jay Gould who argued for 'separate but equal' realms between scientific and religious understandings of the human condition. However, fifty years ago, leading evolutionists such as Julian Huxley and Theodosius Dobzhansky took the appearance of *Homo sapiens* as having some unique cosmic significance in evolutionary history—which went beyond today's demystified 'anthropocene' focus on our species' enormous carbon footprint. They clearly thought that the original Abrahamic sense of human purpose had to be rediscovered—or reinvented—within the modern evolutionary synthesis. Whatever else one might say about ID/creationism, it at least keeps that idea alive.

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