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Science Needs Criticism, Not Cheerleading

'When we lower our standards to pretend we know what we don't know, we diminish the work and misinform society,' says Prof. John Staddon.

By J. Peder Zane
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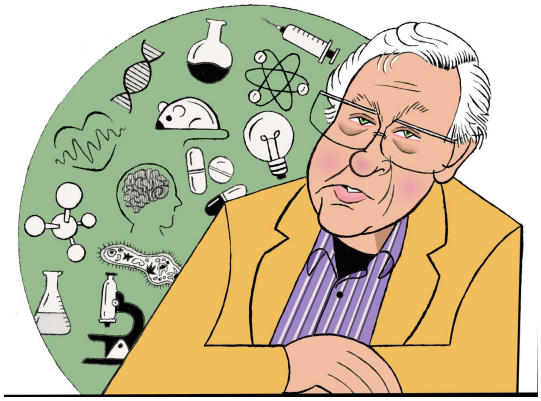

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Durham, N.C.

When Prof. John Staddon read the "Statement to the Community Regarding Anti-Racism" sent out by Duke University's president this summer, he was alarmed. The president, Vincent Price, promised to require "anti-racism and anti-bias training for every member of our faculty, student body, and staff." To Mr. Staddon, that sounded more like indoctrination than academic inquiry. He responded in an open letter.

Mr. Price declared: "I cannot as a white person begin to fully understand the daily fear and pain and oppression that is endemic to the Black experience." Mr. Staddon's rejoinder: "Your reassurance is fine as an expression of empathy. I daresay you feel better, and possibly your African American audience does as well. But feelings differ: Unless the discussion can be moved from feelings to facts, no harmony is possible. Empathy, guilt, and good intentions are a dodgy basis for sweeping resolutions."

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Mr. Price affirmed that the "hard work before us" requires the community to "take transformative action now toward eliminating the systems of racism and inequality. . . . That starts with a personal transformation and . . . must end in institutional transformation." Mr. Staddon countered that "this phraseology will strike many as more like psychotherapy or a call to religious conversion than a policy prescription. What are these 'systems of racism and inequality?' How have they affected Duke and how is Duke involved in them? Or are they societal concerns and thus the responsibility not of a university but of government, the church, and civil society?"

This isn't the first time Mr. Staddon, 83, a tall, English-born American, has challenged the dogma of his peers. A professor of psychology, neuroscience and biology, he is something of a modern Cassandra, warning for more than three decades of the corruption of academia by political activists. As America becomes woke, his scholarly critiques read like prophecy.

But Staddon is a scientist, not a political firebrand. He doesn't trade barbs over opinions but challenges his colleagues to answer the question that has long been the foundation of Western thought and science: How do you know what you know?

In an interview at his Durham home, Mr. Staddon recalls an episode that reflected this problem. An anonymous reviewer of his 2017 book, "Scientific Method"—a broad defense of the process of verification—scolded him for airing the problems of contemporary science. "My critic felt that science is under attack now, so anyone who writes about it for a general audience should do his best to defend it," Mr. Staddon recalls. "Science, of course, should need no defense in a society whose existence depends on it. But when science is not in a healthy state, it needs not cheerleading but understanding and improvement. Science is strengthened not by praise but by criticism."

While Mr. Staddon has addressed issues in the hard sciences, he's more concerned with "festering" problems in the social sciences, "where weak science competes with activist political tendencies around the fraught issues of race, class and gender." In a forthcoming book, "Fact vs. Passion: Science in the Age of Unreason," he writes that "many social scientists have difficulty separating *facts* from *faith,* reality from the way they would like things to be. Many research topics have become taboo which, in turn, means that policy makers are making decisions based more on ideologically-driven political pressure than scientific fact."

Mr. Staddon has challenged the work of leading social scientists, including Duke sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, whose books include "Racism Without Racists: Colorblind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America." "If colorblindness, the MLK ideal, is itself racist," Mr. Staddon has written, "we are in an Alice-in-Wonderland world, and racial strife without end."

Mr. Staddon is especially troubled by the concept of "implicit bias," which holds that

unconsciously held beliefs about social groups perpetuate racism, so that "basically, we are racist no matter what we do or even think." He notes that the main mechanism for measuring it, the Implicit Association Test, "fails the most basic reliability and validity criteria. Yet it is still widely administered to hapless employees in numerous institutions across the country."

He is equally skeptical of "institutional" or "systemic" racism, an idea that originated in 1967 with Stokely Carmichael of the Black Panther movement and political scientist Charles V. Hamilton "and then passed through the publication factories of academe into the mainstream." The term, Mr. Staddon notes, is hardly ever defined. The best effort he has seen is from the influential British government Macpherson Report of 1999, prompted by the murder of a black teenager. It defines systemic racism as "the collective failure of an organization to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin." *Because* is the key word. But now systemic racism is most frequently used as a synonym for any kind of racial disparity, never mind its cause.

"Of course racism exists in America, as it does almost everywhere else," Mr. Staddon says, "but the idea that differences in the outcomes between racial and ethnic groups can be explained by a factor that is basically unmeasurable is the opposite of science, which seeks, or should seek, to identify actual causes."

The politicization of science, he says, isn't limited to race. Not long ago, Mr. Staddon notes, "homosexuality and gender dysphoria were regarded as symptoms of mental illness. Not that I disapprove, the change just shows how supposedly scientific psychiatric diagnoses are often subordinate to cultural imperatives."

He knows such observations are provocative, but they shouldn't be. "These are just facts," he said. "And a fact is just a fact; it doesn't *require* you to do anything. David Hume "—an 18th-century Scottish philosopher—"recognized this when he distinguished between 'is' and 'ought.' The emotions that facts arouse—issues of power and whatnot—should not prevent you from studying the facts. Checking the truth of something should come well before getting agitated about it."

Especially as he ventures into third-rail issues, Mr. Staddon seems fearless. But his attitude is rooted in a scientific training that was far from the fray. After moving from England to the U.S. in the early 1960s to pursue graduate training—at Hollins College in Roanoke, Va., and later the Harvard lab of the behaviorist B.F. Skinner —Mr. Staddon spent decades studying how pigeons, rats, lemurs and other animals learn, producing six books and more than 200 peer-reviewed papers. "Animals are more amenable to controlled experiment than humans, for ethical and other reasons," he says. "They set me a high standard by which to judge human studies, where the problem is more complex, the constraints much greater, and our level of certainty in consequence much less."

His interests broadened during the 1990s when he was asked to edit the Duke Faculty Newsletter. The university—especially its English department, then headed by Stanley Fish, author of the notorious book "There's No Such Thing as Free Speech: And It's a Good Thing Too"—was attempting to move humanities scholarship onto the "cutting edge." To learn more about their thinking and liven up an eye-glazing publication, Mr. Staddon tried to recruit his colleagues to debate one another.

He had few takers. "I would publish an article critical of, say, the postmodern idea that

there is no such thing as objective reality. There was only one faculty member willing to write a response to such critiques. Usually no one was willing to respond," he says. "That seems to be a key characteristic of my more *avant* colleagues. They are not willing to defend their ideas. Fields in the social sciences, especially, have made avoidance easier by subdividing. The American Psychological Association and American Sociological Association each have more than 50 divisions. What you have are little enclaves, filled with people who uncritically approve of each other's work and jack up their citation counts—a collection of circular massage squads."

Still, he says, "my personal tipping point" regarding the uses and misuse of science occurred some two decades later, "when I found out that despite massive publicity to the contrary, smoking has no public cost." His 2014 book, "Unlucky Strike: Private Health and the Science, Law and Politics of Smoking," argued that smoking saves society money on balance because the old need more resources than the young and smokers die more quickly and cheaply than nonsmokers. Smoking "puts individual smokers at risk. It does not put the public purse at risk. It is a private health problem, not a public one."

He also reviewed the scientific literature about secondhand smoke and found little evidence of serious harm—even though the risks of passive smoke have been used to justify banning smoking from most public spaces. "After I published an article that touched on this problem," he says, "I was contacted by a co-author of a massive passive-smoking study, with clear negative findings, that I had cited who attested to the fact that it had been deliberately neglected, and also by a psychologist colleague who sent the manuscript of a concurring book on the subject which he had abandoned for lack of a publisher. Smoking policy is more driven by the politics than by the science and critics of the received view are not welcome."

The political outcome may be defensible on utilitarian grounds—discouraging a habit that is dangerous for those who partake and unpleasant for those who don't. But the corruption of science comes with its own costs: "Many people know these things. Those who don't are made unnecessarily fearful, and those who do come to distrust medical science. Until we can identify the exact physiological and biochemical causes of these afflictions, until we know who is at risk and who is not, the medico-political establishment should stay quiet, or at least rein in its nanny instincts."

These distinctions may strike some as academic. Mr. Staddon says they are, in the best sense of the word: "Science is the search for truth, which is often elusive. When we lower our standards to pretend we know what we don't know, we diminish the work and misinform society."

Mr. Zane is a columnist for RealClearPolitics and an editor of RealClearInvestigations.

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