

Sapere aude revisited and revised

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***Sapere aude* revisited and revised**

Dare to know – *Sapere aude* – is the motto that Emanuel Kant adopted in his titanic argument to mount Enlightenment in human reason. Today the motto has become an icon for modernism. However, Michel Foucault has famously challenged modernist foundationalist and universalist ambitions and redefined Enlightenment negatively as a historical critique of reason. The modernist naivety must be discarded, Foucault claimed; proposing that solace is only to be found in critique, deconstruction and debunking. The post-modern condition is one of restlessness, conflict and continual transition of epistemic and moral regimes.

Recently, the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS) has reenacted the modernist-postmodernist conflict. Back in the 1940ies Robert Merton proposed the CUDOS norms (universalism, communalism, disinterestedness, and organized skepticism) as imperatives that comprised the scientific ethos. However, through the 1960ies and 1970ies Thomas Kuhn and STS scholars demonstrated that ‘actual science’ was far from governed by CUDOS norms. Science – as any other human endeavor – is open to interpretative flexibility, and ‘closure’ of scientific controversies are subject to ‘political’ negotiations among social groups. Reason, it seemed, is nothing more than a historical reification of the interests of the successful and concurring groups.

Recently, prominent STS scholars, however, seem to have reached a point of fatigue. Leading STS protagonist Bruno Latour has asked why (STS) ‘critique has run out of steam,’ and one of the founding STS scholars, Harry Collins, has come to question the viability of the postmodern debunking of science. Even though STS has successfully dismantled modernist foundationalism, universalism and rationalism, Collins argues, that we should maintain faith in science. We should neither unconditionally embark on the modernist project of justifying science, nor should we embrace postmodernists’ skepticism about science. Instead, Collins argues on normative grounds that we should *choose* the values of science rather than try to *justify* them through epistemic scrutiny. In this perspective, science should not be understood as a set of propositions or claims about reality, but rather as a normative and *aspirational* practice that abides to certain values – e.g., the CUDOS ethos proposed by Merton. We should hold on to our faith in science because we are better off trusting science than its alternatives (religion, politics, etc.).

The reenactment of the modernist-postmodernist story within STS brings us back to *sapere aude* – but now from a different angle. Not because we should dare to justify (scientific) knowledge, and not because we should dare to critique knowledge, but because we should dare to engage ourselves in the aspirational practices of science. In this view, education becomes neither profoundly concerned with knowledge acquisition as *construction* (as the modernists claimed), nor with negative critique and *deconstruction* (as the postmodernists argued). Education, instead, is the engagement in practices that aspire to values and norms that offer to sustain and ameliorate life as we know it. Now, *Sapere aude* is seen as *reconstructive* and normative hope. Time will show if this ‘aspirational modernism’ will follow postmodernism in educational theory and practice.

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