

Anna Krylov



DANNY LENNON:

Dr. Anna Krylov, thank you so much for taking the time to join me on the podcast.

ANNA KRYLOV:

Glad to be here.

DANNY LENNON:

Yeah, I have a lot to ask you with, and maybe as a bit of context for people listening, you first published earlier this year a piece titled *The Peril of Politicizing Science*, which appeared in *The Journal of Physical Chemistry Letters*, which for those of us outside of chemistry is a journal with an impact factor of 6.5. So certainly a well-regarded journal, and that article's been read over 65,000 times as of November 2021, the last time I checked; and much of what you put in there as well as a follow-up a piece that you've written, and some other writing I want to explore here today. And one of the general themes I think of all those articles, and I think, as you phrased it, is this current assault on science and education, essentially, how ideology intrudes into scientific institutions, it thus affects the ability to have these open, objective scientific discourse that many people listening will be interested in. So could you perhaps elaborate on that point, why did you feel the need to write these articles in particular, and what was the thought process going into the decision to write such pieces?

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ANNA KRYLOV:

I often do things that may be not the optimal for my wellbeing, so I cannot really defend this decision, but I just couldn't stay silent anymore, witnessing what is happening. And the reason why I was very worried and felt a sense of urgency is that parallels my past experience in Soviet Russia, well, too strong to ignore. I left Russia in '91, and I grew up and spent my best years at the university in this extremely oppressive, anti-liberal climate, and I thought I will never again will experience it after I left Russia, and lived in Israel, and in western democracies like here. But now I see that the old dust of ideas and techniques are being brought to the light and applied to our society and to our science. For example, things like suppression of the censorship, ideological control of everything we do, and most of all, intrusion of ideology in a very aggressive way in science enterprise, even in such technical domains as chemistry research.

DANNY LENNON:

Before we talk about the current climate and current scientific issues, I think it's really useful to consider your background because, like you said, it gives some perspective to this. So you mentioned you grew up in what is now the former Soviet Union, and for maybe people who are unaware, can you maybe just describe a bit about what it was like to grow up in that type of society, but with kind of particular focus on things like critical thinking or open dialogue, scientific inquiry, these types of issues we're going to discuss later on?

ANNA KRYLOV:

It was a very different experience, and I can tell you long stories about the quality of life and how different our childhood was compared to what you experience here, but it's not the most important part. Things which are pertinent to the topic we are discussing are following – for example, we didn't just lift our lives. From very early age, we were told that we are fighting very important to just work to liberate the oppressed masses of the world, and build a better world. So everything we saw, all

information was framed in the terms of struggle between oppressed and the oppressors. There was proletariat and oppressed masses and oppressors, Westerners, bourgeois, and colonialists. So it had very practical consequences, which I can give you example of. So there was also very heavy handed social engineering because that was applied to every aspect of the life, and in education and in science, so things like quotas for correct demographic representations and so on. So everything we saw in education in universities was always criticized through the lens of alignment with Marxist-Leninism. So you couldn't just study chemistry, you need to study Marxist chemistry, and chemistry – wholesome Russian chemistry as opposed to this bourgeois chemistry. And some disciplines were in their entirety declared bourgeois to the science, and were essentially barred from a field of study. So demonization of the West is very familiar, because everything we are told that is coming from the west is rotten and oppressive and has hidden, oppressive agenda, and is hostile to the cause of the new just society and world. Censorship and suppression of individuals was very palpable.

Everything was – information was controlled very strictly. Well, we didn't know any similar, you know, what is happening outside the Iron Curtain except for whatever pictures the government was giving to present to us. We didn't know much about our history, for example, I was a very curious student, and I always wanted to understand, to know history and to understand better how our country developed. But it was not encouraged and often was forbidden to not even question, just to ask questions, not to question some aspects of our past history, but just to ask question about, let's say, Stalin time and how party changed the course, how, for example, some scientific disciplines were just 10 years ago were declared the bourgeois, and now we are studying them, and what was the reason for changing this. So that wasn't allowed. So that was very

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widespread. Every paper that was going out of the university had to undergo some vetting. So even in chemistry, censorship of speech was extreme. You could not express any dissent to the practices of the society; if you express it, you are in danger to be persecuted or even declared a mental patient, because that was one of the tools of controlling the masses, people, it was a diagnosis – through seeking or disagreement with authorities is the official symptom for sluggish schizophrenia, and on these grounds, many dissidents were put into mental hospitals. We see how hidden agenda is seen everywhere, in Russia, some innocent children books or pictures, so poems were scrutinized, and very often people would – the authorities would find something which is hostile to Marxist-Leninist agenda. So here we see very similar scrutiny now, wherein people find racist misogyny, and other reprehensible ideas in places where you wouldn't expect them to see like.

DANNY LENNON:

There is one particular couple of lines from your original piece, the Peril of Politicizing Science that I made a note of, because I think it kind of stands out and makes a point of this, you said, “Science was not spared from this strict ideological control, western influences were considered to be dangerous, textbooks and scientific papers tirelessly emphasized the priority and preeminence of Russian and Soviet science.” And then, you gave a few examples, and, I think particularly of value to this particular audience was you mentioned how genetics was one example of field of study which was considered, “a bourgeois pseudoscience”. So I think this is the kind of example you're getting out of back in that society where you have a labeling that's able to use ideology to overrule what we would see in objective science.

ANNA KRYLOV:

Genetics is very good example and Lysenkoism, in particular, because we can learn from this quite a bit. So Lysenkoism, Lysenko influence was extremely consequential, not only for

Russia, so because of his completely unscientific ideas that tilt to Soviet government. And the idea was that there is no biological determinism and you can talk to crops, and under Marxist influence, you can grow peaches in Siberia, that sort of thing. So this idea appealed to the party and therefore these crazy ideas were defended by the government in a very heavy handed way, and his opponents were persecuted and put – fired, lucky ones get fired, and unlucky ones perished in Gulag. Now, that was not the only reason that authorities liked his ideas, another reason for his incredible influence was that he represented the proper demographics. He was loved by authorities, because Lysenko was born to very poor family of peasants, and he was representative of the class of oppressed, and he was the poster child of this new type of science, not some suspicious child of doctor and an engineer, but a proper poor peasant who couldn't read till age 13. That was a big success story for the authorities. And his opposition to Western ideas, broad opposition was also very appealing to authorities. He not only came up with some crazy ideas about the crops and how agriculture, but he is known to say that, for example, mathematics has no place in biology, because some people criticized his work on the grounds of improper statistical analysis, and he rejected statistics as some bourgeois influence, and was very outspoken about it. And that resonated with the government, that was type of things you can make your career with. And his influence lasted more than 25 years, and actually lasted for quite some time after styling this. So he wasn't immediately removed from his position of power. And you know the consequences, so people die, so he's partially responsible for famine in Russia, and not only in Russia, some of these practices were adopted by Mao Zedong government, and they caused even bigger famine in China as many millions of people died as a result.

DANNY LENNON:

I think that's a particularly useful example for two reasons, one, like you just mentioned, that

this is one of the examples that shows when taken to the extreme, the problems that ideology covering over science can have, in that you can't get a much worse scenario than millions of people dying because of certain ideas being chosen ahead of actual science. So I think that one shows the potential path that things can go; and the second is some of the parallels I'm sure that we're going to discuss a bit later on, one being this idea that we should have distrust science or even mathematics based on where it originated from – so instead of actually grappling with the ideas or the actual formal evidence, there's this in the same way that in the Soviet Union there was this, if it came from sources that were outside of the Soviet Union or came from kind of this wealthy background, then that's a no-no, and so, we need to look the other way. In the same way, now we're seeing some of the same arguments being made about various STEM fields including mathematics, which, again, would be one of the hardest sciences, but even saying physics, chemistry are starting to see some of that as well. And so, it's really interesting to see that parallel, and, I guess, that's kind of what you've been writing about, in large part.

ANNA KRYLOV:

Yeah, and the language is very similar, so you basically declares the whole science, so it's scientific tools, like scientific method or mathematics, just colonialism and the means of oppression. That's how some people call mathematics nowadays.

DANNY LENNON:

And so, if we do jump to the present day, you note that there's these ever increasing attempts to subject science to ideological control, in some ways, or these various types of censorship that we'll probably discuss, you also said in that piece, “Just as in Soviet times, the censorship is being justified by the greater good”, and the greater good here is a really important element, because oftentimes, that is what drives maybe a lot of activism that maybe ends up having consequences that people don't realize. One important distinction that I think you made

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particularly well, I think is important to bring up in this discussion is you refer to the modern times greater good in this context, being around social justice, but a distinction between the lowercase social justice as it means in a literal sense, when we say things around social justice, which I think both of us would be very for having equal society, rights for people, etc., etc., things that we want a better more just society, but that being a distinctly different thing from this ideology that you said is social justice capitalized. Can you maybe just make that distinction if I didn't get it quite right, and why it's important to make that distinction?

ANNA KRYLOV:

So this is something which I think is indeed responsible for many people not recognizing the dangers of what happened, and to me, this play with words is very familiar, because in Russia, the government, our Soviet propaganda was very good at using language and rhetoric to suppress dissent. For example, in Russia, if you are arrested on political charges as enemy of the regime, the terms that government used, you would be called enemy of the people, and who wants to be enemy of the people. Right? So no one wants to be enemy of the people. So the social justice, just like in Russia, you know, Russian Revolution and Marxism-Leninism was motivated in part by big social inequalities and the slow progress towards resolving this inequality. So there was a huge social contrast in Russia, so the goal was declared to help people and to remove inequalities and oppression and build a better world. So, here they also have real societal inequalities and problems and income inequality and many serious issues, so which we need to be talking about, and think about how to address them. But what I see emerging is this ideology, which, they can call wokeism or extreme left ideology, I do not know how to name it, because it seems that every time you name it with some word, the bearers of this ideology get offended and call your names back. And if you call them woke, they say you are racist. And then what we see is done under these banners of social

justice, of diversity, inclusion and [inaudible 00:20:57] all good works, we see that instrumentally, the ways these ideas are implemented, they have nothing to do with this word. For example, if they talk about diversity, equity, and inclusion – everyone is exposed to these ideas. Right? Diversity is good. Equity is good. Inclusion is good. But if they look what people that promote these ideas have in mind, and if you see which practices they advocate, you will see that it's nothing like that. For example, diversity now is used to justify hiring faculty and students by race and gender rather than merit, and it leads to open discrimination.

So, for example, against Asian Americans who are not admitted based on their high scores to the school, they deserve to be admitted, because schools use these holistic admission criteria when they just openly discriminate against them. The same is happening with faculty hiring consensus, so diversity is used as a criteria that is put before the scientific method. Yeah, and I think it's not a diversity, it should be called discrimination. So equity, the same problem, you know, I think very strongly about equal opportunities, because I experienced the different. I lived in the country when opportunity was not equal, and they know what it means. It's extremely important part was for moral arguments to let everyone have an ability to compete and be recognized and to develop to their full potential, but it's also very important for practical considerations for society well-being, they know that equal opportunity helps to foster the best talent and to do things, and that is instrumental for science and technology. Now, how the applied instrumentally in universities, well, you put the way this social justice warriors see equity, they see it as equal outcome. So they argue for instituting quotas, and it says that unless we have absolutely equal representation of different identity groups, racial groups, gender and so on at each profession, each institution, that's the signature of systemic racism, sexism and whatnot. So that's, I would call, not equity

but entitlement. So because we should first talk about merit and about equal opportunity.

Now, inclusion, that's a funny one, because we all like inclusion. Right? Everyone is welcome at the table. I think American society used to be very inclusive and it was very deeply embedded in the culture of people to be open minded to let other people live their lives the way they see fit, and be tolerant to other people's views, religious views or political views. But now they see that this is threatened, and instead of inclusion, they see cancel culture and intimidation. We see people being shut down, people being ostracized socially, people being attacked for expressing their views, and we see extreme rise of self-censorship as a result of this. So that's what that I mean, that what is called Social Justice with capital S, capital J is not what we think is social justice, there's nothing just in these practices.

DANNY LENNON:

It's an extremely complex issue as well, and I think one of the distinctions, at least to me, and I'm certainly not someone with a background in political science or anything, but I think when we think of different ideologies and changes that we would like to see to society, and even using labels like left and right for our political identity, let's say, I think there's a difference in this social justice between people who are truly using that in a kind of political sense and actually trying to do good versus a kind of performative sense. And so by that, I mean, all those things that you just talked about of various difference inequalities that we'd like to fix. There are people doing good social justice work, let's say, but in terms of actually bringing forward good quality policy and doing the hard research behind what makes our society going to be better, and what large scale changes will actually move the needle meaningfully to help people in society who need most help, I think that's a distinctly different thing to where other people spend their time focusing on getting someone on Twitter canceled or pointing out what a

microaggression is, or these other things that give the optics of outrage, but are not actually helping those people in society that needs it. So I think there's those two different sides of it, and that's why I think it's useful that you point out when we're talking about social justice, there is a kind of true kind of meaning of that, of how we can look for a more just society, and then there's this kind of performance piece that some people unfortunately use. So I think that's a useful distinction.

ANNA KRYLOV:

That really bothers me probably the most, the meaninglessness of that, because you cannot, yeah, you see this performative behavior, and it's, I mean, it's a huge waste of people resources and times, and at the same time, it's also smokescreens there to hide some important issues we could be working on. And we see, like, just to give you an example, right, so how useless it is. So you have now every university has this child bureaucracy called diversity, equity, and inclusion. Now, to give you an idea how giant it is, I just learnt a few days ago that in Berkeley, UC Berkeley, where I did my postdoc a number of years ago, they have a budget of \$25 million dollars per year, \$25 million – you can run an entire new department on this budget – dedicated to diversity and inclusion. Now, what kinds of activities such officers do? Well, like, examples are used in my viewpoint in University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, well, they designed this, they have taskforces of how to change the language and how to tell people not to use the world's technique or long time no see, and how expressions like grandfather at the count or dummy variable oppressive, it needs to be avoided. So is it really good use of money? Does it make anyone's life better?

Now, building renaming, for example, or kind of award renaming and building renaming.. big sport now. Every university has these giant task forces for scrutinizing and analyzing named building and awards and positions, whether the people for which they were named committed

some transgressions early on. And then, of course, they judge people usually, using today's morals, and because really not interested in coming out with an answer that nothing wrong was done is a kind of a mission to find some misdeeds. So they proudly rename everything in sight. And then, let's ask a simple question, for example, in Caltech, they recently removed name of Millikan from library, and Millikan was very important scientist, Nobel Prize winner who measured for the first time charge of electron; and he also did a lot of good things for Caltech, he was instrumental for transforming Caltech from a small backwater school into what it is today. He was the president of Caltech. So, his name was renewed because of his connection to an organization which advocated for some eugenic practices. We can talk about exactly what this transgression was. Now, whatever his faults are, can you imagine in 20 years from now, some person of, let's say, from a minority background, or a woman, or a student says, look, I came to Caltech and I learned that the name of the building was renamed and it really helped me to build my career, that really propelled my career forward, and that's where I am now getting my Nobel Prize, so thanks for this people who renamed the building? No, it's not going to help anyone. And it's a completely stupid performative activism but it helps some people to put on their CVs, their concrete practices for promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion, and in some cases, you have to have this on your CV, because if you're applying for chemistry or physics job, for most searches you have to provide diversity, equity and inclusion statement where you need to document your contributions to diversity, equity and inclusion and present some plans. And if you write something like, you will be treating people the same and I welcome people of all backgrounds to my research group, you will be given the lowest ratings on the rubrics that's used to judge.

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DANNY LENNON:

One of the huge issues here is that because there's so much, not only money, but really time and mental energy that people are putting into this that could be used elsewhere, is where you could actually help a lot of those things related to equality or diversity or so on, if we were going about addressing real solutions that helped, but they're much more difficult to come about because they require complex policy proposals, they require deep levels of research over time.

ANNA KRYLOV:

I was involved – I'm involved at USC with the Women in Science and Engineering group for more than 20 years already, where we try to find out what obstacles women face and develop broad programs that help to reduce the obstacles. And one very obvious obstacle for women is childcare, availability of childcare, and we have been advocating for our university to invest money and to make childcare more available, and it's still not happening. So 20 years of efforts, and we do not have any good childcare for small children, we do not have any reasonable for school aged children for summer. At the same time, you see found money to hire, just last year, probably six-digit salary person to be our chief diversity officer and to lead diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.

DANNY LENNON:

The phrase, I don't know where it originally comes from, but it comes back to me a lot is, correct problem identification, incorrect solution proposal, and so, we may, in this case, say, correctly identify that there are certain inequalities, even if that's in the workplace, or maybe broader in society that we would all agree on is an inequality we would like to have; and so, you give a really good one here of women in science. There could be a lot more done to promote women in science, we want to see more women scientists in high profile roles. In terms of then the solution, there's these two different ways that we could go about it, there's one that you just talked about, of, okay, over a long period of time, how do we work to get

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more women interested in science actually in these roles, where they're not going to be discriminated against in the application process, that there are no barriers to different groups of women in various different demographics to actually getting into science, how do we go about that – that's one kind of area where there's a lot of work we could do, or, we could kind of bypass that and go to maybe what some people are proposing now of, well, why don't we just have a blanket recommendation where we have a 50-50 split for any jobs going in any department. And so, on the surface that maybe looks like it's taking care of that, but it's not really right, it's the incorrect solution because what is happening now is then you are making biological sex the number one determinant of who gets a position as opposed to being irrelevant which is what we ideally want. We don't want it to matter what someone's sex is. So I think, yeah, it's the same initial problem that people are looking at, but then their solutions end up being radically different.

ANNA KRYLOV:

Well, so here where classical liberalism and this critical series differ, because I believe in classical liberalism, and I believe that we should be color blind and gender blind, and that's the ideal you should strive to achieve. And critical theory says that, no, race should be preeminent, gender should be preeminent, and the world is constant struggle, and that's how we should see it, and that's how we should apply it. And that's also very similar to how Marxism-Leninism saw the technology, so Lenin was saying that society is always at struggle between oppressors and oppressed, and therefore, it is okay to use violence and oppression in the name of the right group, so it's okay to reverse, to forcefully reverse to flip the caste system. And what this example is using quotas for hiring, well, so it's wrong on many levels. So first, if we hire people, not by their merit, but by some identity groups, how well it, you know, it will really be detrimental for our ability to do good research. Second, it's

immoral, because it's a zero sum game, and if you hire – if you take the opportunity away from, let's say, an innocent young scientist who by no fault of his own was born to be a white male or Asian American, and do not let this person to compete freely, that's manifestly unfair, and that's just not right. And the third reason may be even more subtle, but I think it's very important. Now, one aspect that was partially responsible for slow progress of women is maybe partially responsible is unconscious biases and how people perceive people of minority group, and sometimes they're not given equal recognition, because of this unconscious biases. Now, it takes long time to change our mentality and society to get rid of these biases. Now, if we now institute quotas in the wards and high rank, what does it mean in terms of how people will perceive, let's say, women, if they know that the National Academy of Sciences instituted gender quota. So let's say someone who is elected in the academy, if it's a woman, she cannot say that I know that I was elected for my science, or, I know that I got job for my science. It's taken away from us now, because now you know, if someone tells me Anna, you get this work because you're a woman, I have nothing to say back, because I know that quotas they are using, and that will have really damaging lasting effect, because that will really make the biases much stronger rather than eradicate them.

DANNY LENNON:

I definitely want to delve into some of the issues that are specific to academia and people that are in scientific domains, and I think one of those that you've mentioned a couple of times relates to censorship, and there's two different forms that I would like to get to. Before we get it from external sources, I think this issue of self-censorship is becoming a really interesting one, particularly, for academics who are in roles where there can be real consequences for their career, depending on what happens, and so, there is this external pressure. And so, there's a degree of self-

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ensorship, probably both consciously and subconsciously, and we're probably all kind of prone to that in the current climate I think. So how do you see this playing out in academia at the moment, and for you, what are some of the potential ramifications of, if there is an ongoing self-censorship that scientists and academics have to constantly use?

ANNA KRYLOV:

It's not subconscious then, it's very conscious. People know what to expect, what troubles they can get into if they can say wrong thing. And I have some numbers, so apparently, there are polls that have been tracking how people self-censor themselves for many years since [19]40's and what this poll shows is that self-censorship, that's when people really consciously censor their speech, not because they do not want to offend or transgress, but because they are afraid of consequences. So this questionnaire is very carefully explaining this difference between discretion, when I do not want to say something, because I just generally do not want to hurt someone's feelings; and self-censorship, when I do not want to say something, because I know that they will burn me at the stake. So in the McCarthy era, it was 15% of Americans, one-five that self-censored. Now, according to this poll, now they are in the 40% in the society. And it turns out that among educated and among colleges and among college students, it's even higher. Now, recently, in the wake of Dorian Abbot case, there was a poll at MIT, that polled MIT faculty how much they self-censor, and how whether they're afraid that their voices are in jeopardy, that they cannot openly say what they think. And the numbers are 60 and 80%, so 60% are afraid to speak up on campus. Period. So what does it mean? It means that they cannot have an open conversation about difficult issues. It means that they cannot have pluralistic society when different ideas compete and the best are coming to the top. And in the context of real social justice when we need to talk about difficult issues, and about solutions which are

not obvious and difficult, that creates a huge obstacle to them.

Now, there is also, of course, problem with science itself, because censorship is now affecting science, and probably, for your listeners, it would be more interesting to talk to someone from life sciences where the censorship is present quite prominently now. So I would refrain of making these examples, because I'm not an expert, but in fields like astronomy, recently, an astronomer, a distinguished person published a paper – not published, attempted to publish a paper. He submitted a paper about evaluation of merit and projection of merit of future physicists, and evaluating possible impact of their career. And his motivation was to create better guidelines for hiring committee and explicitly to eliminate biases, to make selection process and promotion process more rigorous. And so, apparently, his ideas of merit itself, and evaluating merit, and making projection offended some people on Twitter, and there was a campaign and the astronomer, this guy, he issued very profuse apology, and self-retracted the paper, take it away. So he decided that, again, there is no problem with methodology, no problem with data, it was pure self-censorship in response to people expressing this offensiveness of the research.

DANNY LENNON:

There's two things I wanted to pull back on and emphasize for people, I think one is really important to again get that definition when we're talking about self-censorship that is different from discretion. So like you say, that's really important that there are certain things that we can certainly decide ourselves not to say, because actually that might offend someone, that might hurt someone, or maybe there's no need to say that, or this is just not a correct thing to say, and those things all stand. So this is not a thing, just, oh, go out and say anything you want, because it's offensive. Self-censorship in the way you've described it here is referring to positions that we actually believe

ourselves to be correct and true, and we can back up with evidence, but then, we're still not willing to publicly state them for fear of repercussions. And I think that becomes the problem as opposed to just this free for all that people presume it is in relation to free speech. The second thing to clarify, you mentioned the case of Dorian Abbot, and so, for maybe people who haven't heard that, this was a geophysicist who had a lecture canceled at MIT, but on the basis of people essentially disagreed on ideological grounds. So I think he had talked previously about affirmative action, but the issue here is whether whatever your views on affirmative action are, it's actually kind of irrelevant to the point, because his lecture was in his domain of expertise on geophysics, it had nothing to do with affirmative action, he wasn't there to speak on the issue, but had his lecture at MIT canceled on the basis of essentially differing views on if affirmative action should be used. So I think that's an example of the case that you wrote about, and I think it's probably a useful example, so I just want to explain that for people.

ANNA KRYLOV:

So yeah, if you take this idea that individuals who are allowed to be scientists should be morally perfect, and in full alignment to this current ideology, just like it was done in Soviet Union, you take this idea to its logical conclusion, and they will end up saying, look, I do not want to hear about this cure of cancer, because the person who developed it was not up to my standards for morality. So that's a very good example, and we see actually these policies are being constantly extended, we see that now for major awards or recognitions there is a component of being good moral standing cannot be, you know, the kind of work this criteria, but when you nominate someone to the work, you should check a box where you are sure that this person is a good person and didn't commit any transgressions. Now, if you think back, I can give an example from the past that shows how absurd it is, for example, Marie Curie, who is my hero, a prominent scientist,

everyone knows who she is, so she got two Nobel Prizes. And when she received your second Nobel Prize, the chairman of Nobel Prize Committee, Svante Arrhenius, wrote to her and advised her not to come. Now why? So at this time, Marie Curie had recently lost her husband Pierre Curie, and at this time she had a relationship with another fellow scientist, Langevin. And that was considered to be highly immoral because Langevin was married and there was a lot of public attention to this. Basically, what the Nobel Prize Committee was saying that on the basis of your moral standing, you should not publicly show up to collect your prize. So she resisted it, she said, I will come to collect my prize, because Nobel Prize was awarded to me, not for the facts of my private life, but for my discovery of radium and polonium. But now we are bringing again the same type of reasoning, okay, apply them to modern day scientists and say that we will only invite people to talk about climate science who have views on social justice that we agree; we only will invite, you know, give awards to people who – if they know that someone voted for Trump, they will not nominate him for their work, something like that, it doesn't really make sense, but that's where they are going.

DANNY LENNON:

I wanted to ask about social media, and there's kind of two sides to this, there's one of the role of actual social media platforms, and then the other side is the role of users on those platforms. From your kind of follow up to your original article, which hopefully will be published by the time this goes out, I'm going to just read a small quote from that because I think it just gets exactly to it, and then I'll ask you for your kind of follow up comments to it. But you write, "Today, censorship is often imposed not from the top, the authorities, but from the bottom, the mob in the form of social ostracism and bullying. Social media provides the vehicle and influences the discourse, substantive and scholarly discussion on complex issues requires discipline and effort. Twitter, where anyone can spontaneously hurl

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25 words into cyberspace has no room for depth or nuance". Can you maybe just elaborate on that of how you see that landscape of now that we're starting to attempt to have discussions on a medium like Twitter where a lot of academics are there, they're trying to discuss their work, but then there can be kind of implications of how people follow them there and otherwise mobilize themselves in some of the these ways?

ANNA KRYLOV:

Yeah, some people are studying this phenomenon, like social scientists and psychologists trying to understand how these new tools and new ways to communicate influence how people behave, and there are some findings that suggest that this type of exchange on social media, which is shallow, kind of performative, and, by design, not allowing nuance, actually make people more polarized and less tolerant to each other. I mean, it's not my area of research, but I definitely sees that quality of discourse is affected. And in some of the cancellation campaigns that comes out very clear, for example, Dorian Abbot case, Dorian wrote an article explaining why he thinks that hiring should be done in a color blind and gender blind case, and he was talking about why he thinks it is important and fair to apply merit criteria and not as a criteria based on race and gender, and he wrote an article about it. Now, people who campaigned to cancel him, they didn't write any – they didn't address his argument, they just call him names, call him racist; and a number of such tweets, when it reached some critical points that MIT could not tolerate was enough to cancel.

So here we have this interaction between these Twitter social justice warriors, keyboard warriors, as they are called for blood and called for cancellation, and, on the other hand, we see the role of the authorities, we see like adults in the rooms that do not behave like adults in the room, because Twitter vigilantism cells, they do not retract articles, they do not cancel lectures.

Lectures are canceled by MIT leadership. Papers are retracted by journals. So we see that the mechanism involves this bizarre interaction between social media where it's very easy for a loud minority to create a big presence without actually essentially going into essence of the problem. And we see, on the other hand, authorities that are so fearful to stand up against this that they are folding and institute the censorship.

DANNY LENNON:

There's a lot of issues, and I'm wary of not going down the social media rabbit hole too deeply here, because that could be a whole other discussion and the role of tech companies and so on, but that's kind of moving us away from the focus of this discussion. So before I finish by getting some kind of conclusions here of what the future may hold in academia, I did want to address maybe a couple of issues of pushback that you may be potentially got in the wake of putting out these pieces, some counter points, whilst the majority of my podcast is apolitical, we don't talk about politics, of course, politics and nutrition science and politics and population health do interact, and so, we have covered that on previous episodes of this particular podcast. And so, regular listeners will know that my politics would probably be considered on the left, although the designation of that is quite vague and maybe meaningless, depending on what we use that term to describe, and it's probably different here in Europe than it is in the US and so on. But regardless, I say all this, because the issues that we've discussed so far tend to get associated with, at least, ideologies or politics that are more on a kind of far left spectrum. Although, as I said, I think a lot of the time, it's more of this performative thing, I actually don't think it has anything to do with politics, because there's no policy behind it, so I don't think it's actually left wing politics as such, it's more ideology. But saying that, because of that, I think one of the things that we didn't really get into, and wasn't the focus of your pieces understandably, but that we didn't get into, and

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that I'm acutely aware of is that there are real dangers of far right individuals and far right groups. And a lot of the time, I generally see that as even more problematic with the main example right now potentially being navigating information around COVID, around vaccines, etc., has been a complete mess, in large part to just utter disinformation coming from predominantly far right circles. So what are your thoughts on that, and maybe if people are thinking, why is that not a kind of central part of the article in the comments, can you maybe just give your kind of response to that?

ANNA KRYLOV:

Yeah, that was one of the, not criticism, but kind of a concern of some of my friends who said, I agree with everything, but why didn't you mention attacks from the right. And the reason is twofold, first, we can quantitatively look into the problem, and if you look at Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, that's the organization that is dedicated to protect academics from harassment and attacks on free speech, and free expression. They started the database on attacks on scholars and cancellation campaigns. It's available on their website, it lists more than 400 cases in the past five years, and it gives details for each case, who initiated the cancellation, whether people were punished, and from which side of political spectrum it comes. And regrettably, we see now that the majority of these attacks are coming from the left scholars. So that's very quantitatively palpable things. Now, the second aspect of it is, I think even more disturbing, like, examples you mentioned are very real. I could have included them, I could have also talked about opposition of climate research, or stem cell research, which is very important in my mind, and was attacked from the right. So these are all real problems, but not just the difference, these attacks from the right, they focus on specific scientific disciplines, which for some reason conflict some ideology from the right, it's climate, stem cells, whatever. Now, what we see a common coming now from this extreme

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left is attack on the foundation of science, so now scientific epistemology. So these attacks basically say that there is no such simple as merit, there is no such thing as objective truth, there are multiple narratives, there is no one way of knowing; there are multiple narratives and the identity of a person who does science is important, which is, of course, in contradiction with liberal epistemology. So that's the reason which I thought was important to emphasize.

DANNY LENNON:

So maybe to finish, let me ask you this, there's probably a lot of people listening here that are either within academia, either as students or as researchers or as lecturers, or people who have had past experience with that and now are out in the world in various organizations, and I think one of the thoughts, and this is something I'm sure you're very aware of, is that many people might be thinking, okay, I can certainly see the point you're making, I largely agree with that, but right now, I don't think it's really affecting me, it doesn't seem to be that widespread in my particular context, or at least I haven't noticed anything, and I'm not too sure that it's kind of worth me kind of spending time or the stress of getting involved in this. Can you maybe give some thoughts on why you think this is such a big issue and the potential consequences of letting this continue to grow and spread and increase more and more over time, like, where it could actually end up for academia?

ANNA KRYLOV:

Well, it's bigger than academia. If they do not speak up, we can end up in the same situation as in some dystopian reality like Soviet Russia or Maoist China or worse, because when people do not speak up against this type of infringement on liberal society, and science is just an aspect of it. It emboldens the carriers of this ideology and the they tighten their screws. And, for example, each cancelation campaign sends a huge chilling effect, because so many people would say, oh, I do not really feel like speaking up my mind at this faculty meeting, because I do not want to be to end up like

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Dorian Abbot, and having my lectures canceled. But they have to do that. And in Russia, many people – I'm actually reading this book now by Vladimir Bukovsky, he is a famous dissident and his life is quite interesting care. And through his life, you can see how this complicity of people allowed these regimes to commit these atrocities for many decades, and continue, and I think it's important that at this point now we definitely have majority of people that share liberal enlightenment ideas. And the polls show that, anecdotal evidence shows that, but we need to speak up, because what happens now is that ideas are silenced and suppressed, and that will not end up well.

DANNY LENNON:

Okay, so with that, let me finish the podcast on the very final question I ask everyone. It's a quick one, and it can be to do with any topic even outside of what we've discussed today, and it's simply: if you were to advise people to do one thing each day that would have a positive impact on any area of their life, what might that one thing be?

ANNA KRYLOV:

Well, call out on BS when you hear one. So if you hear something that doesn't make sense, just speak out and say: “sorry [inaudible 00:57:55]”.

DANNY LENNON:

Excellent. Dr. Anna Krylov, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me, I've really enjoyed having this conversation as well as reading your pieces, which I will link to in the show notes for everyone listening, which you can go and read those, which I recommend you do to give more kind of context to this. And yeah, thank you so much for giving up your time to talk to me.

ANNA KRYLOV:

Thank you, Danny.

[00:58:19]