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Dictatorship of Stupidity

Jean Pütz

This could also be a scientific carnival speech. Jean Pütz became a prominent face throughout Germany with his “Hobbythek” TV show around technique and his flamboyant moustache. Here, the science journalist humorously sketches a history of mankind that culminates in the abolition of gravity – a post-factual folly, but very serious.

Once upon a time, there was no science and people needed religion to explain everyday life. Whenever an epidemic like the plague or cholera occurred, an evil spirit, like the one Brueghel depicted in his painting, was invented and went about its business from house to house, from window to window. Usually a scapegoat was found for the evil, who was sometimes burned at the stake as a witch. People who

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Pützmunter Shows, Köln, Germany

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could afford it bought themselves free of their sins by bequeathing money or goods to the church. Sometimes, however, it was the Mother of God who had to serve this purpose as well. Images of her were richly endowed with jewellery or donations, which ultimately also ended up in the church coffers. So far, so bad.

Then came the Enlightenment and philosophers prepared the age of naturalists. At first very slowly, then faster and faster the sciences developed. Technology also benefited from this. It was James Watt to whom we owe the fact that slavery was finally outlawed after a long uprising against it. Posthumously, I award him not only the Nobel Prize for Physics, but also the Nobel Peace Prize. Suddenly slave labor became considerably more expensive than machine labor, and feudal rule chose humanity for economic reasons. Moral philosophers played a minor role in this. Thank technology.

The inventiveness of scientists and technicians seemed unlimited, however with the capacity to destroy everything again: Millions and millions fell victim to colonialism and nationalism, fascism and communism, among others fired up by the new era.

Emotions Remained Stuck in the Stone Age

Personally, I was shaped by the years of National Socialism and its terrible consequences. But afterwards, for 70 years, democracy and peace brought me and my contemporaries an unparalleled streak of happiness. Science was highly respected and also reached the ordinary citizen. Technology made life easier and easier and education ensured that many could benefit and appreciate this.

But early on it became apparent that this explosion of knowledge could no longer reach everyone due to its increasing complexity. In this heyday of knowledge, academics emerged as a kind of parallel society, displaying education as a status symbol. The world became more and more complex and many people, although using the achievements, were left behind. The state tried to counteract this, but it could not eliminate the social differences through education.

But then emerged a phenomenon of social blending. The prosperity of the masses increased more and more and created a new category, which I would like to call “do-gooders”, who were guided by their feelings. It was no longer a matter of the scientific principle of cause and effect, but the gut took over the reigns of the brain.

Emotions have such a peculiar meaning. They have not been subject to evolution since the Stone Age. At that time, when *Homo sapiens* and mankind emerged in Africa, there was no need to make provisions for the future, because in the tropics nature provided everything you needed to live all year round, regardless of the seasons. Life was good, unless the evil neighbour wanted to bash your head in. So there was a sense of belonging to one’s clan, but at the same time there was xenophobia. This was essential for survival and has impacted deeply our consciousness.

Because many things remained mystical and could not be explained different religions arose, which built on the primal feelings, in some religions even regarded as proof of God. They and the narrow-minded defensiveness are so deeply entrenched in us that today whole nations can be seduced by autocrats and parties targeting these primitive feelings, as once by the Pied Piper of Hamelin.

This marked the beginning of the age of the post-factual. Here, too, technology, which originally liberated people,

played an important role. Never before in human history could the individual obtain so many news. You'd think this would strengthen democracy, but pooh-pooh. There again, a primeval stone-age instinct plays a role, which I will call selective perception. Individuals only pick out the information from the abundance of news and its chaos that happens to fit their world view or stone-age prejudices.

Rational Beings of All Countries, Unite!

They may still contradict people's experience. But the Internet gives them confirmation via the method of Fake News, by now even through algorithmically controlled automated systems. This is the only way to explain that in the country where science was held in the highest esteem a president won the elections who completely negates its findings if they don't suit his political purposes. In order to consolidate his power, he unabashedly spreads fake news and finds unswerving resonance among his group of supporters who are controlled in this way.

But such processes are taking place not only in the USA, but all over the world. Thus, potentates in Venezuela or in Turkey succeeded in making the people believe that they could completely ignore natural and social laws as well as all findings of modern research in order to recruit enough followers to blindly support this dictatorship of stupidity.

In Germany, too, we must be careful that this does not take hold, because both the extreme right and the left are trying to seduce the citizens with promises that can never stand up to reality and science. They act as if they could pull the stars from the sky.

Now imagine that someone from the right or left German political scene comes up with the idea that gravity would be

antisocial, because people with higher weight and therefore stronger gravitational force would be disadvantaged. This agitator would then also master the means of mass manipulation, as some politicians may be credited with. To back this up democratically, a referendum would be initiated with the goal: “We abolish gravity!”

Many citizens would be blinded by this and 51% would decide to actually abolish gravity. Then the decision would be handed over to parliament with the mandate to implement it without considering side effects and risks.

You think such a thing is not possible? Then take a look at what happened with Brexit or with Trump and Erdogan or with ... Salvation from our post-factual age promises only one remedy: to give reason a chance again – or as I have often called for: Rational beings of all countries, unite! Democratically relying on swarm intelligence is obviously not enough. For this I engage myself with an official page at Facebook and with my daily updated homepage “Science – just arrived!”.

It'll save me a psychiatrist in my old age.

The Author

Jean Pütz (Fig. 16.1) is a trained electromechanical engineer who subsequently studied electrical power engineering and communications engineering. He also studied economics and was trained to become a teacher. After a short intermezzo as a senior teacher at the vocational school in Cologne, Pütz became the founder and head of the editorial group “Natural Science and Technology” on WDR television as editor-in-chief, author and presenter. For 30 years he hosted the “Hobbythek” (1974–2004).



Fig. 16.1 Under his magnifying glass, Jean Pütz recognizes developments in society, science and technology that are getting out of hand

Today he is a freelance science journalist, organizes “Pützmunter-Shows”, a physical-chemical cabaret, gives lectures at universities, is a multiple award winner for humorous lectures, e.g. at the “Forschologikum Bonn”, and “Goldener Narr” (Golden Fool) of the Rhenish Carneval Corporations. For current comments on technology and science, see: www.jean-puetz.net