

Isabelle Stengers

Another Science is Possible

A Manifesto for Slow Science



'Today, more than ever before, we need this book. Isabelle Stengers, a philosopher known internationally for her willingness to tackle the big questions of our time, insists that "another science is possible". She offers the new generation intellectual weaponry in the formidable project of turning science away from its destructive collaboration with neoliberal capitalism to help build – yes – a better world. And don't we need one!'

Hilary Rose Emerita Professor of Genetics & Society, Gresham College, London

Like fast food, fast science is quickly prepared, not particularly good, and it clogs up the system. Efforts to tackle our most pressing issues have been stymied by conflict within the scientific community and mixed messages symptomatic of a rushed approach. What is more, scientific research is being shaped by the bubbles and crashes associated with economic speculation and the market. A focus on conformism, competitiveness, opportunism and flexibility has made it extremely difficult to present cases of failure to the public, for fear that it will lose confidence in science altogether.

In this bold new book, distinguished philosopher Isabelle Stengers shows that research is deeply intertwined with broader social interests, which means that science cannot race ahead in isolation but must learn instead to slow down. Stengers offers a path to an alternative science, arguing that researchers should stop seeing themselves as the 'thinking, rational brain of humanity' and refuse to allow their expertise to be used to shut down the concerns of the public, or to spread the belief that scientific progress is inevitable and will resolve all of society's problems. Rather, science must engage openly and honestly with an intelligent public and be clear about the kind of knowledge it is capable of producing.

This timely and accessible book will be of great interest to students, scholars and policymakers in a wide range of fields, as well anyone concerned with the role of science and its future.

ISABELLE STENGERS is Professor of Philosophy of Science at the Université Libre de Bruxelles.

Cover image rclassenlayouts/123RF

Cover design Lyn Davies Design

Printed in Great Britain

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Strengthening the Science of the Possible

Policy

Another Science is Possible

A Manifesto for Slow Science

Isabelle Stengers
Translated by Stephen Muecke

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First published in French (excluding Chapter 4) as *Une autre science est possible!*
Manifeste pour un ralentissement des sciences © Éditions La Découverte, Paris, France,
2013

French text of Chapter 4 © Isabelle Stengers

This English edition © Polity Press, 2018

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
101 Station Landing, Suite 300
Medford, MA 02155, USA

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ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-2180-7
ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-2181-4 (pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Stengers, Isabelle, author.

Title: Another science is possible : a manifesto for slow science / Isabelle Stengers.

Other titles: Autre science est possible! English

Description: English edition. | Cambridge, UK : Polity, [2017] | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017026397 (print) | LCCN 2017027589 (ebook) | ISBN 9781509521838 (Mobi) | ISBN 9781509521845 (Epub) | ISBN 9781509521807 (hardback) | ISBN 9781509521814 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Research--Social aspects. | Science--Social aspects. | Science--Philosophy.

Classification: LCC Q180.A1 (ebook) | LCC Q180.A1 S73513 2017 (print) | DDC 501--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017026397>

Typeset in 11 on 14 pt Sabon by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire
Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by Clays Ltd, St Ives PLC

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Another Science is Possible

For the GEC0.
For Serge Gutwirth
For all those who allowed me
to think that this is not simply utopian.

Contents

1	Towards a Public Intelligence of the Sciences	I
2	Researchers With the Right Stuff	23
3	Sciences and Values: How Can we Slow Down?	48
4	Ludwik Fleck, Thomas Kuhn and the Challenge of Slowing Down the Sciences	83
5	'Another Science is Possible!' A Plea for Slow Science	106
6	Cosmopolitics: Civilising Modern Practices	133
	Notes	157

Towards a Public Intelligence of the Sciences

Should ‘the public’ ‘understand’ the sciences?

Our Anglophone friends speak of the ‘public understanding of science’.¹ But what is meant by ‘understand’ here? Many people think each citizen should have the basic ‘scientific equipment’ (or literacy) necessary to understand the world we live in, and especially to accept the legitimacy of the transformations of the world that the sciences bring about. In fact, when the public begins to resist an innovation that scientists have backed, as notably in the case of GMOs, the usual diagnosis points to the lack of such understanding. Thus, the public apparently fails to understand that the genetic modification of plants is not ‘essentially’ different from what farmers have been doing for millennia, but is just faster and more effective. Others say that the methods that make for ‘scientificity’ have to be understood first, and that the public supposedly mixes up ‘facts’ and ‘values’ because it doesn’t understand that scientists are free not

to ask certain questions. Of course, it is not a matter of denying citizens the right to accept or reject an innovation, but they should do so only on the basis of solid reasons, and not confuse scientific facts with their own convictions or values. The need for an apprenticeship in the sciences, it is argued, is founded on the fact that close observation, the formulation of hypotheses and their verification or refutation, form the basis not only for the construction of scientific knowledge but for all rational procedures. The sciences are therefore a model that every citizen should follow in their daily lives.

Such arguments are used today to justify a veritable ‘order word’² coming from public authorities when faced with a somewhat suspicious citizenry. If the latter are sceptical about the benefits the sciences bring to society, the response will be: ‘The public and its science have to understand each other.’ The possessive ‘its’ implies what standard science lessons in school try to get across: scientific reasoning belongs by right to all, in the sense that, confronted with the same ‘facts’ as Galileo or Maxwell, each of us could have drawn the same conclusions.

Of course, anyone with even a minimal exposure to the history of science, or to the sciences themselves ‘as they are made’, can easily conclude that the anonymous rational being drawing these ‘same conclusions’ is just the correlate of the ‘rational reconstruction’ of the situation, from which any reason for hesitation has been purged, and where the facts literally ‘shout out’ the conclusion they lead to with all the authority one could wish for.

In any event, laboratory conditions, reconstructed or not, have very little to do with those situations we are

confronted with as citizens. For the latter, I would use Bruno Latour's felicitous phrase, 'matters of concern', which, in opposition to what are presented as 'matters of fact', insists that we think, hesitate, imagine and take sides. 'Concern' happily incorporates the notions of pre-occupation and choice, but also the idea that there are situations that concern us before they become objects of preoccupation or choice, situations which, in order to be appropriately characterised, demand that 'we feel concerned'. We should not talk about these situations being 'politicised', as too many scientists complain. They are a long way from being occasions for the more or less arbitrary or contingent expression of political engagement; rather, what they require is the power to make people think about what concerns them, and to refuse any appeal to '*matters of fact*' that would bring about a consensus. If there is a question to be asked, then, it is first of all how such situations have so often come to be separated from this very same power, which they require.

To return to GMOs, they constitute a quite different 'matter of concern' from laboratory GMOs defined in terms of the preoccupations of biologists working away in well-monitored spaces. GMOs cultivated across thousands of hectares raise questions to do with genetic transfer and pesticide-resistant insects, questions that can't be raised at the level of the laboratory, not to mention issues such as patent applications for modified plants, the reduction (already critical) of biodiversity, or the runaway use of pesticides and fertilizer.

The essential thing with 'matters of concern' is to get rid of the idea that there is a single 'right answer' and instead to put what are often difficult choices on

the table, necessitating a process of hesitation, concentration and attentive scrutiny – and this despite the complaints of the entrepreneurs, for whom time is money and who demand that everything that is not prohibited be allowed. Then there is the propaganda, often in conjunction with scientific expertise, that all too frequently presents an innovation as ‘the’ correct solution ‘in the name of science’. This is why I would propose, in place of the notion of understanding, a ‘public intelligence’ [*intelligence publique*] of the sciences, involving the creation of intelligent relationships not just with scientific outcomes, but with scientists themselves.

What should the public understand?

When we speak of public intelligence, we have to emphasise first of all that it is not a matter of activists denouncing, as enemy number one, those biologists who have presented GMOs as ‘the’ rational and objective solution to the problem of world hunger. Rather, if a public intelligence is necessary, it essentially has to do with the very fact that those scientists were able to take this kind of position without a care in the world. If we put to one side hypotheses about dishonesty or conflicts of interest, then the question becomes one of understanding how the training and practice of researchers can lead to such arrogant and naive forms of communication, completely devoid of the critical thinking they so often boast about. How can one explain also the failure of the scientific community to publicly express outrage over this abuse of authority?

Quite the opposite occurred, it seems. Consider this extract from the summary report for the *États généraux*

de la recherche held in 2004, in which researchers told the public what they should be understanding:

Citizens expect solutions from science for all sorts of social problems: unemployment, depleted oil reserves, pollution, cancer . . . the path that leads to the answers to these questions is not as direct as a programmatic vision of research would have us believe . . . Science can only function by dealing with its own problems in its own way, shielded from urgency and from the distortions inherent in economic and social contingencies.³

This quotation comes from a collective report, not the wild imagination of some individual. Its authors not only attribute to citizens the belief that science can solve problems like unemployment, they too seem to agree with this belief. Apparently, science can solve problems like this, but only if it is allowed the freedom to formulate its own questions, shielded from the ‘distortions’ said to be ‘inherent’ in ‘contingent’ economic and social preoccupations. In other words, authentic scientific solutions transcend such contingencies, and thus can ignore them (just as those biologists cheerleading for GMOs have ignored the economic and social dimensions of world hunger).

In short, what I have dubbed ‘matters of concern’ are characterised as ‘distortions’ in this account, while the solution that ‘science’ comes up with is identified as an answer to a problem that has at last been well-formulated. It follows that citizens are right to be trusting, but they have to know how to wait, and understand that scientists owe it to themselves to remain deaf to any noisy or anxious demands.

In fact, in 2004, the researchers did not address

citizens, but went over their heads to the public authorities in charge of the politics of science, on the occasion of its redefinition in the terms of the ‘knowledge economy’. In their complaint they took up the hackneyed theme of the goose that lays the golden egg – stand back, keep it well fed, and don’t ask difficult questions, otherwise you will kill it and there will be no more eggs. Of course, it is not the business of the goose to wonder for whom her eggs are golden, and the generally beneficial character of scientific progress is taken for granted. The small question as to why this progress may today be associated with ‘unsustainable development’ is not asked.

I don’t think that scientists are ‘naive’, like the goose whose egg we remove from under it in order to give it a new value for the sake of humankind. They know perfectly well how to attract the interest of those capable of turning their results into gold. But they also know that the knowledge economy marks the end of the compromise that guaranteed them a minimum of vital independence. They can’t, however, talk about that openly, because they fear that if the public were to become aware of the ways in which science ‘is made’, they would lose confidence and reduce scientific proposals to simple expressions of particular interests. ‘People’ must continue to believe in the fable of ‘free’ research, driven by curiosity alone towards the discovery of the mysteries of the world (the kind of candy that helps so many well-meaning scientists to set about seducing childish souls).

In short, scientists have good reason to be uneasy, but they can’t say so. They can no more denounce those who feed them than parents can argue in front of their children. Nothing should upset the confident