

INTRODUCTIONARY ARTICLE

THE COLLAPSE OF THE ETHICS OF THE PUBLIC  
SPHERE AND ITS EDUCATIONAL  
CONSEQUENCES

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to present the ways in which the ethics of authority, including government, is collapsing in the contemporary world. The authors demonstrate what consequences numerous abuses and negligence can bring to education and the future. The article is based on reflections supported by actual research, which confirms the theses contained in it. Not only consequences are highlighted, but also ways in which they can be prevented. The most important aspect for the progress of science and the prevention of the depreciation of states is to stand firm against the abuses and appropriations committed by authority figures and to fight against “skimpiness” both in everyday life as well as in science.

The current world picture does not promise a happy future. Humanity should strive for greater openness without allowing itself to be subjected to authorities whose actions contradict what they really are.



**Key words:** public sphere, authority, depreciation, education, science, appropriations, ethics, collapse

In recent years, the image of the public sphere as predictable, based on fixed game rules, has been slowly being destroyed before our eyes (Applebaum, 2020). Several phenomena contribute to this, forming a kind of conglomerate whose influence causes us to doubt the hitherto system of values promoted by various civilisations, based on work, persistence and learning as the foundations of success. This, in turn, causes something resembling a new great depression in us if only we consider ourselves to be honest people who care about ourselves, others and our surroundings - if only we have a conscience. There is a particular justification for using big words at this point since we are talking about fundamental values for which people live and die because they give meaning to our small, everyday chores and, in a larger sense, to our entire existence.

There can be mentioned specific categories of such phenomena indicating a destabilisation of morality in the public sphere and leading to doubts about the sense of our actions, bearing in mind that they do not cover all existing possibilities. The authors are aware of the complexity of the issue and the numerous personal, environmental or cultural determinants of the formation of individual value systems. Thus, the article should be considered a kind of invitation to deeper reflection and a contribution to more extensive studies, especially international ones.

To the set of basic negligence of the public sphere, leading to a new great depression, we include the depreciation of science, power and man. After all, as we shall show, all these areas are closely and inextricably connected.

## DEPRECIATION OF SCIENCE

Societies that care about the future rely on proven data and scientific achievements for their plans, projects and actions (Pinker, 2021). Through the regularities that are being discovered by scientists devoting their lives to solving successive research problems, reality becomes more comprehensible, and the future can be designed. Ignoring science and replacing it with common-sense knowledge seems similar to burning banknotes or throwing money down the drain - completely irrational and uneconomic. It is all the more surprising to ignore the findings of the scientific world and replace them with obscure, pseudo-scientific considerations.

The depreciation of science can have two faces. One of them is ignorance (Łukaszewski, 2018), and the other is simply fraud (Krimsky, 2004). For both, the will to cause harm is needed, characteristic of a manipulator, correlated with the lack of knowledge, ignorance and deficits in critical thinking of consumers of science.

Indeed, there is no excuse for those who manipulate facts and data in order to gain power over others or for material benefit, fame, controversy or

other malintent. Such people should, at the best of times, be preached at the damage done by scientific dishonesty and, preferably, such conscious pests should be eliminated from public life since every scientific distortion adds to the confusion of the system of knowledge and the disorientation of ordinary people. Those who do not know how the scientific world works and are not familiar with the methodology or philosophy of science can easily mistake facts for scientific myths, especially if the false claims are supported by people with scientific degrees (Keyes, 2004).

Science can also be falsified at its source. Researchers sometimes colour the data, goose up the results, and avoid presenting research failures. The desire to appear in the world of science at any cost leads to corruption right at the very beginning. Fortunately, scientific journal editors generally have ways to expose unreliable research and eliminate illegitimated theses. Besides, readers must trust above all the journal's prestige or the scholar's figure (number of citations, Hirsch index, specialisation, research experience). Luckily, there are many ways to verify the prestige of the scholar. One "just" has to know how to do it; with this, sometimes the scholars themselves have difficulties. Moreover, it is not entirely clear whether this is due to the intellectual weakness of the scholars themselves, who do not know what indicators are crucial for assessing the prestige of colleagues, or whether some factors that have nothing to do with substantive assessment enter into the equation, such as bruised egos, the desire to retaliate and depreciate a colleague for real or imagined spites. Those with extensive experience working in an international environment are very well aware that psychopathic superiors and dysfunctional environments occur everywhere. Academy, which may seem to outsiders as an area free of prejudice, the bonfire of the vanities and stereotypes, is no less emotionally charged than other working environments. In the context of our deliberations, the problem ultimately comes down to the creation of false or little innovative knowledge. Fragile environments that promote no-talent/intellectually impoverished knave and mediocre scholars, while limiting the development of valuable, disobedient individuals, especially when it comes to knowledge creation and verification, become ineffective and amoral by definition, as their ability to create an alternative reality is far greater than that of ordinary people and groups.

Inobservant consumers of knowledge should not feel justified either (Wojciszke & Rotkiewicz, 2018). Making mistakes is absolutely natural, but an unwillingness to change, learn from mistakes, and improve are the causes of degeneration and collapse in the long or even in the short perspective.

When we ask ourselves where the anti-intellectual trends and depreciation of science come from, we inevitably have to come to education as a system that produces immature minds incapable of critical thinking. It is possible that educational systems, which produce unreasonable voters, plan too little space in their educational programmes for the formation of key competencies, especially for those on which the rationality of choices and appealing to facts instead of opinions will depend. Key competencies can easily get lost

in the extensive, ever-growing catalogue of information and skills proposed as the essentials of an educated person. The result is entirely different from the one expected. Graduates think that everything was equally important (or unimportant) and cannot reconstruct the hierarchy, structure, and priorities in the learned system of knowledge and skills.

Science is also depreciated by self-proclaimed pseudo-authorities who intentionally use pseudo-scientific theories and concepts for financial gains. They sell false hope at an enormous price to the undereducated or those who are eagerly seeking alternative solutions to problems that cannot be solved by science. These specialists in various alternative therapies rejected theories, and discarded practices participate in sharing the general information “chaos”, increasing the confusion of modern man (Higgins, 2021).

Suppose we assume that proper education is based on well-chosen key competencies, which should become priority learning goals. In that case, rationality should be the starting point for designing education systems. Possibly this seems quite obvious to some, but it must be understood that the school as an institution can easily be vassalised by party structures in democracies (just like a prosecution, courts, the police, an army, media). Many times, schools have been (and still are) a tasty morsel for usurpers of various kinds, who wanted (or want) to raise a new man, obedient to the authorities, not thinking too much, disoriented in the world outside the borders of a closed national community. If anyone doubts the possibility of crude indoctrination in the age of the Internet, it is enough to look at the examples of China, Russia, Belarus and the Eastern European democracies. The explanation for this can be found in social psychology and experiments on obeying authority figures (Cialdini, 2021).

Even the greatest admirers of rationality, such as Steven Pinker, must admit that it requires more educational work and is not given to us once and for all. Doubt, natural to humans, can easily lead us astray when we are inclined to seek alternative explanations in the face of inconvenient truth. Undoubtedly, by introducing the basics of social psychology into school curricula, we would manage to avoid many cognitive biases and misinterpretations.

While people generally try to act rationally, the problem is that a small percentage of irrational people or all those abandoning rational choices in particular situations: haste, deception, mistake. It seems that there must be premeditation behind immoral behaviour. Pinker points out that irrationality (called stupidity or foolishness) is immoral (2021). A vice against rationality is an abandonment of self-development, an effort to be better, overcoming one's limitations, taking care of reaching successive developmental thresholds and accomplishing life tasks (Koziellecki, 2000).

Obviously, only the combination of the intellectual incapacity of the average citizen with the sleight of hand of elites creates the right potential for ruining the morality of the public sphere. However, sleight of hand consists in creating ineffective, irrational or ideological systems.

## DEPRECIATION OF AUTHORITY

The smooth functioning of society depends on the recognition of hierarchy, dependence, authority and authority figures. We are taught this over years of individual lives, generations and millennia. The rule works, and societies develop, as long as irrational and anti-scientific forces do not come to power, which treats positions and statuses as benefits to obtain other, additional benefits (Galinsky & Schweitzer, 2016).

Healthy societies have tested ways of getting rid of power that is harmful to the country. In addition to the electoral mechanism, there is a range of independent institutions with extensive powers of control, an inquisitive media, an independent judiciary and prosecution. However, even democracies that appear to be fairly solid can succumb to political upheaval, turbulence, and unexpected collapses. We have seen such situations in the case of the United States under Donald Trump and still do in the case of Johnson's UK, or eastern European democracies like Poland and Hungary. We do not write about authoritarian regimes or those pretending to be democracies because democracies are the political promise of freedom, equality, and justice. Authoritarian regimes can only give their citizens the hope of enjoying power as long as they are useful.

Depreciation of authority can take various forms: incompetence, corruption, civil rights abuse, propaganda, and appropriation of the public sphere (annexation or subordination of independent institutions).

Authority depreciates and becomes disgusting to citizens primarily through abuses and law-breaking, supported by permanent impunity. If citizens see the corruption of power, abuses and impunity, the level of trust must inevitably fall. An incompetent, possessive and unpunished authority leaves the citizen with less and less space for expression over time and thus for learning. Distrustful citizens are the ruin of relational capital in the public sphere (Lasinska, 2013). We pull out from social life, or we increasingly theatricalise it (we make it artificial, without any content) so as not to betray our true views, for which we could face some form of punishment, exclusion, stigmatisation, or ostracism. Citizens then concentrate on what they have any influence on. They move their activity to the private sphere - family, friends, neighbours, that is, to primary groups (Putnam, 2001).

The second effect, equally damaging to the public trust of decent citizens in the public sphere, is a sense of exploitation and injustice. It cannot be ignored. If we think about the possible reactions of a decent person to the abuse and impunity of authorities, it is necessary to take into account, first of all, huge frustration, which with time may develop into a permanent, irremovable resentment, which will be challenging to cope with in the future (Reykowski, 2020).

In such a case, what can a decent citizen do?

They may stop being decent and join the camp of corrupted rulers. Specialists in backroom politics have ways of corrupting political representatives

and ordinary citizens. Many do not even need to be corrupted - they will come and offer a price at which they can sell their values as soon as the pressure increases.

The other option is to remain with the feeling of being abused, cheated, or experiencing violence. Such a state itself is destructive to the psyche. Erinyes will claim blood *ad infinitum*. Such citizens will certainly experience deep and lasting doubt about the meaning of democracy, power, citizenship, and the country. Over time, they may begin to doubt whether it is possible to bring justice and conciliation into effect at all or whether they will remain big words in their eyes.

A decent citizen may also emigrate, which usually involves a loss of professional status and building up a social position from scratch. Such a situation is almost always encountered when regimes become radicalised - in recent years, for example, this has been the case in Belarus and Russia following its attack on Ukraine.

In each of these cases, we face worsening problems with social trust, which has a negative impact on the dynamics of human capital development and subsequently on economic growth. A decent citizen, seeing people boldly appropriating the public sphere and using power for their interests, will sooner or later start to doubt the highest values on which we tried to build the Western civilisation: truth, justice, honesty, and selflessness. Is it even possible to implement such values in a situation of state appropriation, corruption of authority and presumption of political representatives?

Thus, destroying the morality of the public sphere is also like turkeys voting for Christmas when the representatives of authority are turkeys. Through appropriation, they are able to provide themselves with a life of comfort, but sooner or later, they will have to face the judgement of society, even if they do not have a properly formed sphere of values reflected in the concept of conscience. Some of them will be judged while they are still alive, others only after their death - by historians as examples of traitors and thieves stealing from the public good.

Short-term thinking and self-concentration protect arrogant and cynical representatives of authority from imagining the long-term consequences of their decisions. The pursuit of satisfying of essentially insatiable hunger for possession of various kinds of resources effectively blinds them to the anticipation of what is inevitable - collapse, disgrace, contempt. They do not realise that acting against the community in the long term can only bring illusory benefits. The joy of possession and power in the corrupters will in time turn into contempt and disgrace of the citizens towards them. History provides many examples of how representatives of prominent families aligned themselves with the enemy and then suffered the consequences in the form of notoriety, trial, banishment or even death. To paraphrase a saying, cemeteries are full of people who, until a certain time, considered themselves untouchable. Not necessarily those who died of natural causes.

At this point, Pinker's concept of combining morality and rationality shows itself once again. An immoral action is, at the same time, an irrational action in the short or long term because sooner or later judges will come to give their verdict on the deeds and write the perpetrators down in the history of villainy. The perpetrators may explain to themselves that things will be different and fondly hope that they will build the world according to their own rules or that they are acting in accordance with their understanding of work. However, they cannot feel safe, as has already been shown by international courts judging war crimes. Obedience to authority cannot be an excuse for the discontinuance of moral judgement (Baron-Cohen, 2012).

If we allowed the corruption of the public sphere to be excused and explained away, the Erinyes would find no relief. Simply put, the human desire for revenge would lead to even greater corruption or retreatism. The Christian concept of repentance, sorrow for sins and the desire for atonement are fundamental to understanding how to calm the Erinyes.

### DEPRECIATION OF A HUMAN AS A BEING

The consequence of the corruption of the public sphere is the disintegration of the community in its various aspects (Judák et al., 2022; Maturkanič et al., 2022a; Tkáčová et al., 2021a, b;) but above all as based on consensus derived from the social contract. A decent citizen has to wonder whether being decent is profitable for them. The described experiences of concentration camps, gulags and communism, which were forming homo sovieticus, document extremely accurately how easily and quickly a person can be pushed to the limits of humanity. After crossing them, the mechanisms responsible for survival in extreme conditions are released.

The rise of the democracies is the beginning of a process of retreat from democracy and the destruction of an independently thinking entity. Destroying the morality of the public sphere will sooner or later end in authoritarianism and lawlessness if the resistance of decent citizens is too weak. It must also be taken into account that opposing the whole process of appropriation of the country, the law and the public sphere is easier at the beginning when relatively few people are yet aware of the direction in which the actions of the authorities are heading. The longer the appropriation process goes on, the more difficult it is to resist because it involves losing work, social contacts, freedom and even life. The only option then is the emigration mentioned above.

Furthermore, it is also crucial to realise that replacing science with ideology and authority understood as service to others with an understanding of it in terms of possessions unavoidably leads to the depreciation of the human being.

Civilisations have maintained the principle of reciprocity as one of the basic norms binding the social world together. Its quintessence is Martin

Buber's concept of relationship, in which "you" is another "I" (Buber, 1999). Slightly simplifying, one can say that we should respect the Other at least as we respect ourselves.

What can be thought of in the context of Buber's philosophy about people appropriating and corrupting the public sphere? First of all, it is worth realising that the very fact of wielding authority changes the attitude towards the law. Research results show that those who wield the authority are generally convinced they are allowed more than their subordinates. As a result, they may disregard legal regulations and break moral norms. This leads to the conclusion that they cannot treat others as equals if they feel privileged, above law and morality. In the case of those who destroy the public sphere, it is even worse. The appropriation takes place at the expense of others. The robbed are most often abstract entities because they are social groups, but behind these abstract concepts and cold definitions, there is always a concrete "they" similar to those who rob and steal. However, they are not seen as equals but as human material to be used (Weiner, 2005).

A decent person, imbued with the principle of reciprocity, has not developed good patterns of reaction in such situations: obeying the law, although the thieves of the public sphere do not obey it; offering help and compassion when they are victims themselves; trying, although they are being used. A decent person is convinced that they can expect the same from others by acting honestly. A criminal will not hesitate to use this against the victim. That is precisely the problem. The only reasonable solution seems to be... to apply the principle of reciprocity, remembering that we decent people are the victims. We cannot return good to cynical players who will not hesitate to use it to plunder further and destroy. We must realise that there has never been and will never be partnership and reciprocity in this situation. We will be victims of symbolic and institutional violence and sometimes even banditry in velvet gloves in the face of degenerate laws, otherwise, we will be permanent dissent, resistance, and drug on them.

## FUTURE

There is no good solution. The bandit game requires determined resistance. The more we accept corruption, the more it will spread. Decomposition, disruption or even destruction of value systems will inevitably happen. We will be plumbing the depths of the abyss.

Resistance is costly but more possible in the beginning. The longer one delays "non-possimus", the harder it is to be effective. Alternatively, one must be prepared to pay high prices. You may have to pay with your life.

The depression of decent citizens comes from observing the excesses of authority, corruption, and impunity. A similar principle is applied in the case of dictatorships and democracies that are on the "right" way to authoritarian

systems. Citizens become subjects literally and figuratively. They are bowed to pressure and gradually incapacitated.

Observing the development of Eastern European democracies and totalitarian regimes, we can find certain common features (although comparing the situation in Poland, Hungary and Russia is relatively difficult). Where there is an appropriation of the public sphere, the philosophy of society is based on the recognition of the primacy of domination as the basic pattern of action. Domination means control over things and people, who are reduced to the role of tame sheep, sheared rams or peons/carls for arbitrary use, deprived of human rights.

The opposite of subordinated societies, which favour domination, are open societies, with a culture of sharing resources, in which it becomes an essential part of the social system to build bonds, trust and care for others. (Králík et al., 2022; Maturkanič et al., 2022b; Pavlíková et al., 2021; Roubalová et al., 2021) That requires the resistance of decent people and the repulsion of the wreckers of the public sphere and then the feeding of the Erinyes.

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