

Editorial

The scientific method – the procedure of objectively establishing facts about the natural and social world through observation and experimental testing – is the widely accepted fundamental framework for a wide array of fields of research, ranging from the formal and natural sciences to the social and cultural sciences. The pursuit of knowledge by means of reason fuelled the scientific revolution in the second half of the sixteenth and first half of the seventeenth centuries. It thus paved the way for the age of enlightenment, with its wide-reaching influences on science itself, but also on sociology, philosophy, economics, law and the role of religion in society. By its very principles, the scientific method implies the rejection of dogmata and, instead, the willingness to be proven wrong, independent of shifting political ideologies and agendas. Unsurprisingly, throughout history, science has faced – and still faces – opposition from groups and institutions whose power it calls into question. Galileo himself, arguably the father of modern science, was tried, found guilty of heresy and sentenced to imprisonment by the Roman inquisition for promoting heliocentrism, which was based on his empirical observations but ran contrary to religious dogma.

During the first half of the twentieth century, both fascist and communist regimes, although ideologically opposed, waged vicious attacks against science. They exerted control over researchers to promote ideas aligned with their ideology, appointed loyal figures to key positions, removed undesirable scholars, and used censorship and propaganda to shape public opinion. Another hallmark of the ruinous influence of political extremism on science is the promotion of pseudo-scientific theories, often wrapped in nationalist garments of collective identities, such as Nazi racial theory, Lysenkoism, ‘German physics’, and many others. Such tendencies survived well into the twenty-first century – for instance with the rejection of a rational approach to the Covid-19 pandemic. Unfounded conspiracy theories and dangerous populist advice influenced even the highest political level, culminating in such life-threatening suggestions as to consume bleach to protect against infection, formulated by the 45th president of the United States.

This Focus issue addresses such dangers from a historical and contemporary perspective. It is the outcome of a symposium entitled ‘Perils for science in democracies and authoritarian countries’, which was held in January 2023 at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Beersheba, Israel. Acknowledging that attacks on science have proven to occur across the entire political spectrum,

participants focused on challenges faced by the research system which, although in different forms and with different intensity in the countries and contexts of our readers, represent a danger in and for today's liberal democracies. By means of a historical contextualization, the authors argue that with the revival of identity-centred policies emerging at both ends of the political spectrum, threat and damage to careers, the silencing of dissenting voices and the cancellations of events, these movements conjure echoes of extremist ideologies of the past. They warn that any departure from long-established and proven principles, such as the scientific method or individual merit-based equality of opportunity, will have serious negative consequences for the future of science and technology, also in the Western world.

The Editorial Board of the *European Review* welcomes discussions on the controversies between politics and science, on the state of scholarly inquiry and research and on the challenges they face throughout the world. Readers holding diverging opinions from those expressed by the authors of this issue are encouraged to voice them constructively by submitting a response to this journal.

Alban Kellerbauer
Editor-in-Chief, on behalf of the Editorial Board