

Political censorship of science

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On June, the 23rd of last year, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) published its *Draft Report on the Environment*, a report on environmental quality. The EPA is an autonomous federal agency known for its reliability on environmental studies and safeguards. Its *Draft Report* is considered by *Science*, the journal of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), the nation's most scientifically reliable analysis on environmental quality.

The latest *Draft Report* makes no reference whatsoever to the changes in global climate. According to different media, among which *The New York Times*, *CNN*, *BBC*, *Fox News* and *Associated Press*, the reason for this is that the text has been "revised" by the Office of Management and Budget and by the Council on Environmental Quality of the White House.

The "revision" would have touched the climate section and would have been so thorough that the new text "no longer accurately represents scientific consensus on climate change" an EPA technician, who prefers to remain unnamed for fear of retaliation, revealed to the *Associated Press*.

Since the revised text would no longer have represented scientific consensus on climate change but only a political will, the EPA Administrator, later to step down from office, Christine Todd Whitman, preferred to eliminate the entire section while saving the rest of the *Draft Report*.

We are thus bearing witness to a case of real censorship. A case of political censorship of science. It is an important event, not to be underestimated for at least five reasons.

1. Because the censor can be traced back to the greatest and most influential democratic government in the world.
2. Because it is a recidivous censor. Already in September 2002 the EPA *Report on Air Pollution* had been published without the usual climate section, that had always been present in the six previous reports.
3. Because this kind of censorship troubles the waters of democratic discussion. “This is like the White House directing the secretary of labor to alter unemployment data to paint a rosy economic picture” said Jeremy Symons, expert on climate politics of the National Wildlife Federation. And this is unacceptable in democratic societies.
4. Because governments trying to propose and/or impose bad science for political reasons, manipulating the free opinion of scientists, undermine the credibility of the public institutions that should produce scientific knowledge.
5. And finally because governments trying to propose and/or impose bad science for political reasons, manipulating the free opinion of scientists, undermine the autonomy of science.

Many authoritative people have recently underlined the fact that in its post-academic era science risks involution¹. The philosopher Pierre Bourdieu expresses the fear that the enormous combined economic and political pressures could lead science to lose its historically most precious quality: autonomy.² The historian Paolo Rossi reminds us that modern science was born when the “paradigm of secrecy” dominating medieval culture was cancelled and when scientific information communication was made free. Going back to that paradigm, though in an economic and/or political sense, would mean betraying science’s own nature³.

During the past months we have seen the Mertonian norms of communism, universalism, disinterestedness and economic detachment violated in the name of

¹ John Ziman, *Real Science*, Cambridge University Press, 2000

² Pierre Bourdieu, *Science de la Science et Réflexivité*, Raisons D’Agir, 2001

³ Paolo Rossi, *La nascita della scienza moderna in Europa*, Laterza, 1997

superior economic ends: for example the Venter/*Science* case on the publication of the article on human genome sequencing⁴.

On the latest number of *Jekyll.comm* Giancarlo Sturloni recalled the fact that, in some cases, political pressure may lead to the limitation and self-limitation of scientific communication⁵.

Today we are witnessing a political censorship in what is considered the temple of democracy: the White House. Thus John Ziman's, Pierre Bourdieu's and Paolo Rossi's doubts increasingly become ours.

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⁴ Craig Venter et al., *Science*, **291**: 1304-1351 (2001)

⁵ Giancarlo Sturloni, "Preventive self-governance", *Jekyll.comm*, **5**, June 2003, http://jekyll.sissa.it/jekyll_comm/commenti/foc05_01_eng.htm