



REVIEW: Lee McIntyre. *Dark Ages: The Case for a Science of Human Behavior*.

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Source: *Spontaneous Generations: A Journal for the History and Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2011) 85-87.

Published by: The University of Toronto

DOI: [10.4245/sponge.v5i1.14576](https://doi.org/10.4245/sponge.v5i1.14576)

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Published online at jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/SpontaneousGenerations

ISSN 1913 0465

Founded in 2006, *Spontaneous Generations* is an online academic journal published by graduate students at the Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology, University of Toronto. There is no subscription or membership fee. *Spontaneous Generations* provides immediate open access to its content on the principle that making research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge.

REVIEWS

Lee McIntyre. *Dark Ages: The Case for a Science of Human Behavior*. xx + 144 pp. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006.*

Boaz Miller[†]

The social sciences today, Lee McIntyre argues, are in the same state in which the natural sciences were in the Dark Ages. In the same way that religion inhibited the progress of science and the growth of knowledge in the Dark Ages, so is political correctness inhibiting progress in the social sciences and the growth of knowledge today. This is why, so he argues, the social sciences do not follow the scientific method like the natural sciences do, and are hence incapable of offering effective solutions to pressing social problems such as crime, famine, and war. The reason why political correctness is able to affect science in this way is our fear of knowledge. Human beings are simply too terrified to discover unpleasant truths about themselves, so they prevent certain hypotheses from being seriously tested in social science research. Rather, they prefer to indulge in comforting pseudo-scientific ideology. These are bold claims, but McIntyre's argument to support them is thin and weak. In particular, it fails to come close to meeting the standards of proof by empirical evidence that McIntyre requires the social sciences to meet.

The first thing that strikes a reader of this book is how few contemporary examples of "bad science" are actually given as evidence to support the claims and in how little detail they are discussed. The contemporary evidential support seems to be in inverse relation to the boldness of the claims and the sweeping nature of the generalizations of which the book is full. One of these few examples is the research on the relations between immigration and welfare, on which the book spends only three (!) paragraphs (pp. 22-23). This example is supposed to show that the social sciences practice bad methodology and are corrupted by ideology. This is because scientists have not managed to reach agreement on this question, and have accused each other of being politically biased. But McIntyre neither gives any reason to think that this example is representative, nor considers other interpretations. Perhaps this is a case of equivocation, where "welfare" means different things for different researchers? Maybe only one side is corrupted by ideology? Maybe some of the research is good and only some of it is bad? Perhaps

* Received 16 November 2010.

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there are similar controversies in the natural sciences as well? All of these options are left unexplored. It would have been much better if instead of devoting an entire chapter (chap. 4) to retelling the old stories of Galileo and Darwin, McIntyre had provided and critically discussed relevant contemporary examples of what he regards as bad science.

A second weakness of the book is McIntyre's unwillingness to deal with evidence that does not support his claims. For example, contemporary historians argue that the Middle Ages were not as dark as they were thought to be. They point out many scientific, technological, and philosophical achievements of this period, and argue that much of the bad reputation of the Middle Ages stems from the writing of Enlightenment philosophers, who liked to denigrate everything that preceded them. McIntyre spends half a paragraph nodding toward these claims, but does not engage with them whatsoever. Rather, he simply concludes that "there were no significant breakthroughs in art, science, philosophy, or literature during this time" (p. xv). I don't take the historical analogy to be as significant to McIntyre's major claim about the factors responsible for the poor state of social science research today as he takes it. I would therefore not stress this point, except that it is indicative of the book's failure to meet the standards of evidence and argument that it preaches.

In terms of a philosophical argument, the book does somewhat better. In order to support his claim that fear of knowledge is what ultimately holds back social science, McIntyre provides several arguments against the view that the social sciences are in some way inherently different from the natural sciences in ways that prevent them from being as successful in manipulation and prediction (pp. 29-41). To be fair, he has engaged with these arguments in more depth in a previous book. Unfortunately, he does not provide a positive argument to the effect that if we rule out these objections, the only remaining available explanation is indeed fear of knowledge. In addition, he does not consider the possibility that while each of the reasons that he rules out *alone* is not responsible for the difficulty with manipulation and prediction, a *combination* of several such reasons (which may be more common in the social sciences than in the natural sciences), is responsible. Last, McIntyre does not engage with philosophical arguments opposite to his own, according to which science, and the social sciences in particular, ought to be influenced, in some ways, to some extents, and in some circumstances by ideology. (Janet Kourany's model of "socially responsible science" comes to mind.)

Dark Ages is an interesting read. It makes provocative claims, which deserve to be heard in the current discourse on the social sciences. Unfortunately it is a one-sided ideological manifesto that lacks sensitivity to nuances, and is poorly supported by evidence. Granted, it is targeted at the general public rather than the scholarly community, but this is not a valid excuse. There are good popular books that manage to give sophisticated arguments and discuss complex examples in an accessible manner. *Dark Ages* is just not one of them.

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REVIEW: McIntyre, Dark Ages

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