

Josef Pánek: Portrait of a Scientist in a Postindustrial Society

Translated by Bruce Bybee

The celebrity screamed, "What are these provocations you're throwing at me?"

"Yeah, exactly," the guard nodded. "I told him twice already that he doesn't look right, his badge isn't visible, and I didn't let him through; and those ripped jeans of his, that t-shirt, and that filthy jacket. Oh yeah, and he's got something with his hands; some kind of injury; and when he talks to you up close, you'll smell the booze; yuck. He's probably hammered too; likely why he's babbling about, you know...?"

I defended myself: "And what's a guy with a gun doing here, in a conference center (I pointed at the guard)? It's completely ridiculous: take the forum for instance, the very place we're standing in right now, originally a word from the old, ancient Greeks for a space of free & public gatherings, public polemic and discussion, and today it's about presenting the latest scientific discoveries, which belong to everyone in the world! The lay public funds science with taxes, so it should have the freedom to enter and attend the conference, that's why this, i.e., this exact spot (I pointed), is called a forum; instead, we've got armed guards, entrance for a hefty fee and with a sign hanging 'round your neck, in a white shirt and pressed trousers; or maybe a full-on suit, huh? Are we scientists or politicians? Meanwhile, I haven't slept or eaten in four days, I'm just drinking, mentally at rock bottom, 'cause I'm powerless, 'cause they killed my discovery and probably want to steal it from me, even though what they killed is still 750k ly away (I pointed towards my cloud through the glass roof of the conference center), otherwise our entire nearby universe, incl. our own and neighboring galaxies, wouldn't even function! And they're gonna kill it! We've been observing the structure of our galactic surroundings with telescopes, both ground-based and on satellites 'round the Earth, for centuries, and no, no, it does not behave according to current, established, standard theories, and no one had an explanation for it until we, i.e., me and my co-authors, came along, and still, they killed it and rudely cussed us out that they won't allow it, that it's wrong, that we're liars, that they don't like it! OK, they don't burn people at the stake for revolutionary discoveries anymore! Except now it continues by other means, where instead of fire, we have a one-sided anonymous peer review process for scientific publishing. And now, to top it all off, a prominent and famous scientist (I pointed at her, i.e., the celebrity, frowning and glaring at me) is going to explain to me in one sentence that it's all fine, for god's sake!"

The celebrity frowned, "What's this ideology you're throwing at me?"

I didn't back down: "Sure, keep on repeating that the armed security at the conference center is here 'cause of the homeless, the terrorists, and others, so they don't intrude, and I'll tell you, with complete logic, that OK, yes, it's partly 'cause of them, but mainly 'cause of business, 'cause only where there's business, are there weapons, and here, it's already approaching the kinda business run by those who start wars and created terrorism, various people, e.g., owners of currency-issuing banks and multinational corporations, who you don't know and will never meet, the ones you catch fleeting glimpses of in the media, news that pops up and disappears,

one of the vilest & most insidious phenomena of our (modern) world, as a device to manipulate the public and to thereby achieve & maintain power over it through fear & dread for their lives, i.e., basic, instinctive human reactions to mortal threat, and further through both mental and physical weakness, intentionally caused by an excess of passive and mentally undemanding entertainment through electronic media, consumerism, hyper-processed foods, and relative comfort. Yes, catching terrorists and driving out the homeless means public recognition, voters, and electoral victories, i.e., power, but not for politicians, they're mere pawns, who publicly, through democratic governance and laws, carry out what others create, i.e., the system of the modern world, and only those are the ones with power, the ones who spark revolutions, coups, wars, and pogroms in the struggle for power, they only care about power, they don't give a damn about climate change, global migration, the unequal distribution of the world's wealth, or pandemics, for them, these are just tools in their fight, they profit from them despite needing nothing more, just wanting more than others have, i.e., more power, so they secretly fund terrorism, suicidally carried out by mentally ill and fanatical individuals, as we occasionally catch glimpses of in media reports, the fact that innocent people die 'cause of it, in vile, treacherous ways, with no chance to defend themselves or escape, is a tool for them to manipulate the public and maintain obedience. Have you never once thought, what if there is no other way than having these sickly ambitious but simultaneously stupid people in power, real power, these celebrities of public and social life that the broad masses in their ignorance—caused, among other things, by a lack of access to scientific knowledge—uncritically admire and worship for their material wealth will always, by necessity, abuse rather than use scientific knowledge and render it counterproductive, and what if our work and ideas are therefore pointless and misguided...? That you'll never get anywhere, not to the old Celtic tower or the lighthouse, not to the sea or the port, just like you'll never reach freedom or a life without fear, when in our modern world we are left only with fences and walls topped with barbed wire, private property marked NO TRESPASSING, armed guards, cops, cameras, and EXIT ONLY signs, even here at a scientific conference in a conference center?"

The celebrity objected: "What is this paranoia you're throwing at me? Why are you dragging the general public into this, what do they have to do with science, man? This member of our security team might actually be right that you're drunk. Go get some sleep first, man, then come back. I refuse to continue this conversation. The general public is, for understandable reasons, forbidden from entering the conference center, and that includes anyone who hasn't paid the participation fee; that's entirely justified. Please," she turned to the guard, "escort him out. You have my permission—as you can see on my conference badge (she gestured to her belly) (hanging there was her participant badge with her name and below it two wide stripes—a purple and a silver—indicating a keynote speaker and mentor, along with a brown stripe of a member of the conference's organizing committee), I have the authority to have any inappropriately behaving individuals removed from the conference center, and beyond that we have a conference code of conduct and the center's house rules in place. Please." She pointed at me.

The guard—I couldn't believe my eyes—put his hand on his holster and stepped towards me; I stared at him wide-eyed and yelled: "Have you lost your mind? We're at a conference center! You're seriously gonna pull a gun on me—here, of all places? No way! I'm not going anywhere!"

The celebrity stepped in: "Wait, wait, wait, we do not want a scandal (it's bad for business). You (she turned to the guard) please take your hand off that holster before someone notices. And you (she pointed at me) stop arguing about the obvious; wear your participant badge visibly, i.e., around your neck, like any normal scientist; your discovery does not exempt you from your obligation to follow proper conduct at the conference center as anywhere else. Yes, yes, you may have made a groundbreaking discovery, I'm not ruling that out; but you must understand

that anything of that sort shakes up standard, established theories, and that generates resistance; surely you understand that, don't you? You're causing problems with that alone; and now this; have some sense, man."

I defended myself: "No, I won't wear that 'round my neck. I'm neither a sheep nor a walking billboard. If I followed the rules, I'd never have made the kinda discovery I did."

"Yes—and just as easily, you could become a thief, a murderer, or a terrorist, and defend it by claiming you made (she waved her hand to the sky) some kind of discovery! Judging by how you behave, they probably rightly, completely justifiably refused to publish your discovery. No: you, like everyone else, even e.g., me, a prominent scientist with achievements, must follow the rules."

"For god's sake, surely you understand that this is about which rules; as a scientist, you should know it's necessary to distinguish, not to see things black and white. And we are scientists here and this is about science; although...I'm not even sure about that anymore! Not even about which rules, since almost none of them actually work! Our social rules led to the creation of racism, terrorism, religious hatred, hooliganism, wars and their export; rules in science have led to its commercialization and conventionality, and thus to its partial dysfunction. Our universe, e.g., does not behave according to our rules at all! It behaves completely differently! And my discovery is proof of the failure of our established rules. That's why you all oppose it so fiercely."

The celebrity frowned again: "What are these philosophical musings you're throwing at me? Philosophy has no place in the exact sciences, man!"

I buried my face in my hands; lamenting: "And that's what a scientific celebrity in astrophysics tells me! Do you even realize that nearly 100 years ago, our colleagues like Bohr, Pauli, Einstein, Heisenberg, and others already understood that their discoveries touch on things like the nature of human life and its meaning, and that it's up to them to interpret, i.e., philosophize, 'cause laypeople, incl. philosophers, can't understand the mathematical language of physics...? No, this makes no sense. No!"

I lifted my head, turned in silence, walked across the forum, and exited the conference center (through the EXIT ONLY door), making my way along the line of my colleagues, i.e., scientists in my field from 'round the world, waiting to enter the center. Every single one of them had a garishly colored conference participant badge hanging 'round their neck on a wide ribbon, covered in loud, colorful ads. Their line stretched all the way to the Liffey, c. 1 km.

They were looking me over: I had no badge hanging 'round my neck and a scuffed—but not filthy, as the guard had claimed—leather jacket and torn jeans.

It struck me: Jesus, it's exactly like when they used to punish me in kindergarten by taping my mouth shut and making me kneel in the corner because I talked during nap time and didn't want to sleep!

I told myself: "And yet I didn't do anything wrong: just discovered an intergalactic cloud with the mass of a small galaxy, still out there, just beyond our own galaxy in the direction of M31, about 750k ly away; it's there because it's determined by the laws of physics—it's simple, natural, and beautiful, otherwise it wouldn't work. But down here on Earth, it's as if completely different, nonsense laws apply, even though it's still the same physics, same universe, same energy, yet it's as if it wasn't like that at all!"

I walked along the line of my colleagues from 'round the world (trailing me with a silent gaze) all the way to that pretty, white, modern-styled bridge over the Liffey and crossed it; bought a bottle of whiskey at the nearest shop on the other side, made my way to my old spot on the riverbank across from the conference center, and sat down there on a rusty white pipe cover; in despair, I didn't understand anything and had no idea what had just happened or what I was to do next.