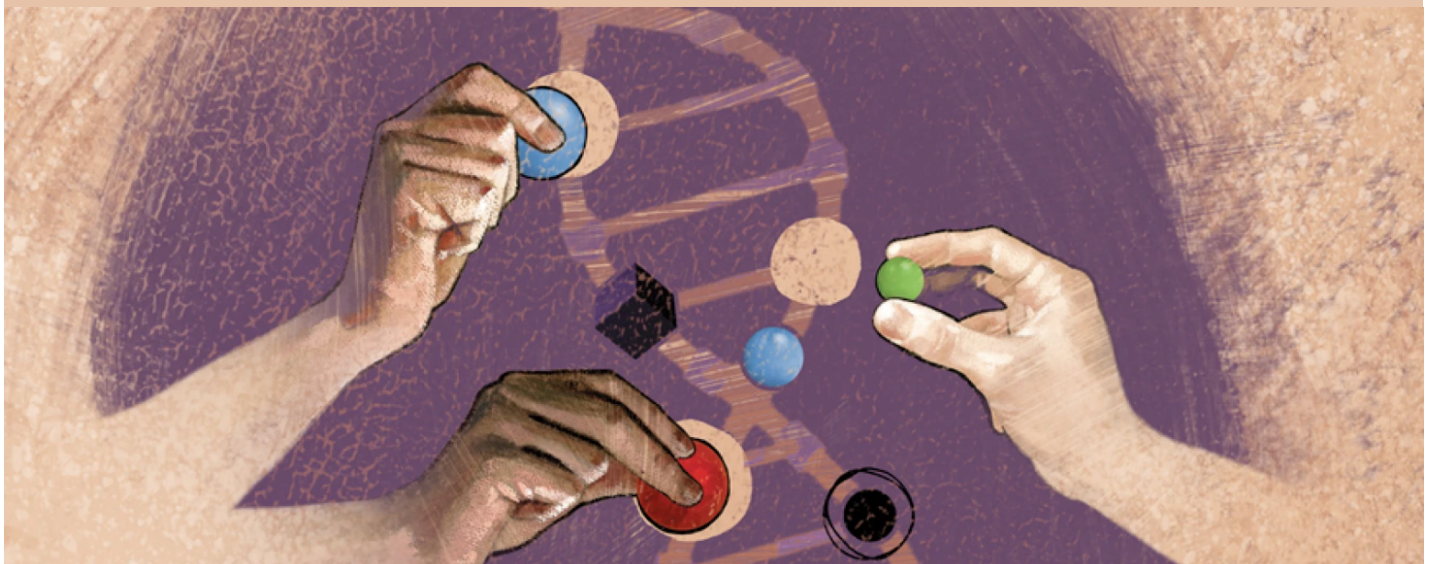


THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Against Anthropology's Newfound Scientism

Authoritarian decrees on controversial matters like the biology of sex violate the best traditions of the field.





MATT MANLEY FOR THE CHRONICLE

THE REVIEW | ESSAY

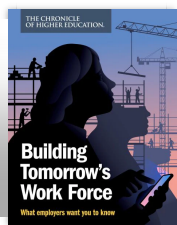
By *Nicolas Langlitz*

OCTOBER 4, 2023

Anthropology has come a long way in the past decade. In 2010, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) decided to eliminate the word *science* from its long-range plan (a decision it would subsequently walk back). The association no longer wanted to advance anthropology as the “science” that studies humankind in all its aspects. Its future would lie in the advancement of “public understanding” of humankind in all its aspects. So it was rather a surprise when, in 2023, the AAA and its Canadian counterpart, Casca, cancelled the session “Let’s Talk

About Sex, Baby: Why Biological Sex Remains a Necessary Analytic Category in Anthropology” at their annual meeting, because, they said, it ran contrary to “settled science,” contradicted “scientific evidence,” and undermined “the scientific integrity” of the conference program. When reviewers had initially accepted the session, they had [overlooked](#) that the panelists had committed “one of the cardinal sins of scholarship — it assumes the truth of the proposition that it sets out to prove, namely, that sex and gender are simplistically binary, and that this is a fact with meaningful implications for the discipline.”

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At first glance, it seems as if the association’s institutional politics vis-à-vis science had turned by 180 degrees — from rejecting science to defending the scientificity of the discipline against a pseudo-science the AAA board compared to the race science of the late 19th and early 20th century. For, like race science, the claim that biological sex is binary and that only gender identities are fluid was not only scientifically erroneous but also morally wrong, an abuse of “‘scientific’ reason to question the humanity of already-marginalized groups of people.” In the association’s administrative diktat, the good and the true align against the bad and the false.

As an anthropologist of science who has studied biological anthropologists ethnographically, I have been a participant observer of my [discipline's growing moralization](#), as well as of its return from a critique of science to what many cultural anthropologists had previously dismissed as naïve scientific realism. It is the latter I want to talk about here. In the 1980s, cultural and biological anthropologists fell out over the emergence of sociobiology, which the former denounced as sexist and racist. In the 1990s, anthropologists and other science-studies scholars sought to expose the social construction of scientific knowledge. The goal was to demonstrate that Western scientists were just as culturally biased and socially interested as everybody else and that, consequently, everybody else should have a say in what counted as a scientific fact. The scientific realism maintained by most practicing scientists was thought to be starry-eyed at best and, at worst, an ideological scheme to impose a regime of power/knowledge on others.

It was, of all people, Bruno Latour — who had conducted one of the earliest ethnographic studies of a scientific laboratory, and had worked for more than two decades to demonstrate the constructedness of scientific facts — who became one of the first to notice that constructionism no longer served just the political agenda of the academic left but had been newly adopted by the American right. When skeptics of climate science began to argue that the fact of human-made global warming was informed by scientists' liberal bias, they were able to dismiss it as mere “situated knowledge,” another partial perspective; consequently, people who happened to be partial to other causes had little reason to base their policies on it. During the 2010s, anti-science attitudes gained more and more ground on the American right.

Anthropology's knowledge culture is in dire need of reform.

Many predominantly left-leaning American cultural anthropologists reacted to this development by adopting a pro-science attitude: In environmental anthropology and multispecies ethnography, select scientific papers are no longer read to expose their authors' standpoint but to build on their observations and arguments. Some of my own work on contemporary uses of psychedelic drugs fits that bill as well. The AAA's statement on why it pulled a panel on biological sex in the name of science speaks to cultural anthropology's recent affirmation of science.

The conception of science now embraced by the AAA to prevent a discussion of biological sex as an analytic category is not that of "science in action" but of science as a matter of settled controversies, where nature talks straight and facts are facts. It is the kind of expert knowledge that the first generation of anthropologists of science challenged in their storm on the citadels of science. I have always been critical of the excesses of this critique of science. Science needs to establish consensus among experts at arm's length from other social fields to minimize the impact of cultural biases, political meddling, and economic interests. But the AAA has long favored forms of engaged scholarship over a model of science that maintains a modicum of independence, as its recent decision to prioritize proposals for executive sessions that promote anti-imperialism, anti-ableism, anti-transphobia, etc., demonstrates. Now it leverages expert knowledge to fight the good fight of the American culture wars. This recent turn toward the presumed verities of

“settled science” is ironic.

Anthropologists should ask themselves two questions in this case. First, if conformity with settled science really became the principle according to which sessions were selected — if this principle was not applied selectively to sessions that deviate from the normative preferences of the AAA’s board — what would be included, and what would be excluded? One session listed in this year’s [conference program](#) that has not been canceled, for instance, discusses how anthropologists should approach ghosts encountered during their fieldwork. Such entities, it is suggested, can help anthropologists describe the world: “Ghosts can also be teachers, showing us how to fashion accounts of the social.” Is the existence of ghosts in line with settled science? Even the session organizers have their doubts; their announced intention is to go “beyond existing disciplinary frameworks.”

In the anthropology of science, there has been a longstanding interest in marginal positions: people working outside of the dominant networks of anglophone academe, citizen scientists, underground researchers, and animal lovers with quirky beliefs and insights that no controlled laboratory experiment or clinical trial could provide. These knowledges were not just the object of detached cultural analysis — they were “given voice,” “taken seriously,” “thought with.” In short, they were included in anthropological theorizing. While this has produced some strange fancies and has led anthropologists to make common cause with scientific outsiders, it has also opened up thought-provoking perspectives beyond scientific orthodoxy.

Requiring conformity with settled science would impoverish the discipline a great deal.

The second question is whether scientific knowledge of biological sex is indeed settled. In science studies, the paradigm case of settled science is textbook knowledge. I consulted half a dozen biological anthropology textbooks from the past 10 years. Sex differences are usually discussed under the rubric of “sexual dimorphism.” Analytically, they all distinguish between males and females. Some qualify the distinction with reference to Klinefelter syndrome (a genetic condition where a person has an additional copy of the X chromosome beyond the X and Y chromosomes characteristic of males) and Turner syndrome (in which a person has a single X chromosome but no second sex chromosome, and appears phenotypically female). The qualification does not entail the dismissal of the analytic category of biological sex in contradistinction to culturally constructed and more-fluid gender roles. Even Agustín Fuentes’s textbook *Biological Anthropology* (2011) describes sex differences between males and females and differences in gender roles between men and women, which is remarkable considering that Fuentes is one of three biological anthropologists who signed a [letter](#) of support for the association’s withdrawal of the controversial session; the letter repeats the claim that the pulled session would have run counter to the settled science in biological anthropology and evolutionary biology. If textbooks are indeed a good touchstone of settled science, it would appear that the canceled panel defended scientific orthodoxy, whereas the letter’s signatories represent a heterodox challenge to this position.

The fact that there is an ongoing controversy is confirmed by the recent publication of several articles problematizing the binary representation of the human body in anatomy textbooks, which ignores intersex people, or the practice of binary sex estimation by forensic anthropologists examining the remains of dead transgender people who underwent surgical modifications. Recently, 42.4 percent of surveyed forensic anthropologists agreed that sex was binary, and 56.2 percent disagreed. In their titles, many of these articles are “breaking” or “challenging the binary,” which suggests attacks on the status quo. They are framed as contributions to “renewed debates regarding definitions and boundaries of human gender/sex,” as one [article](#) puts it. On the other hand, one still finds spirited defenses of the established view that “biological sex is binary, even though there is a rainbow of sex roles,” in the words of a 2023 article.

All of this shows that the AAA’s reference to “settled science” is misleading. There is a live controversy. One would expect a professional organization that claims to represent American anthropology not to arbitrate such a controversy by decree but provide a platform for it to play out. What else do we have conferences for, if not to learn about the latest scholarly debates?

Anthropology’s knowledge culture is in dire need of reform. A rapprochement of cultural anthropology with science is a step in the right direction. But repressing science in the making in the name of settled science is indicative of a love of science that will not find much favor with most anthropologists who identify as scientists. Nor should it find favor with anthropologists critical of how scientific expertise is used in the service of the

powers that be. It is time to change anthropology's bath water, turbid from resentment against the sciences. But anthropologists should not throw out with it the baby — *their* baby — which has always been wary of dominating uses of expert knowledge.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

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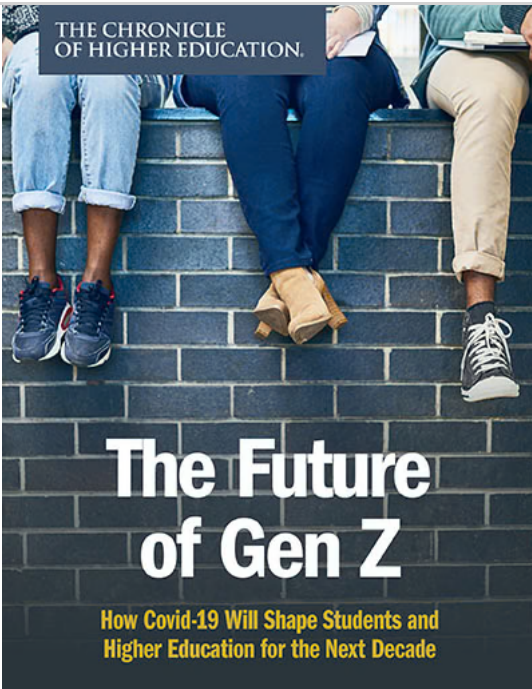
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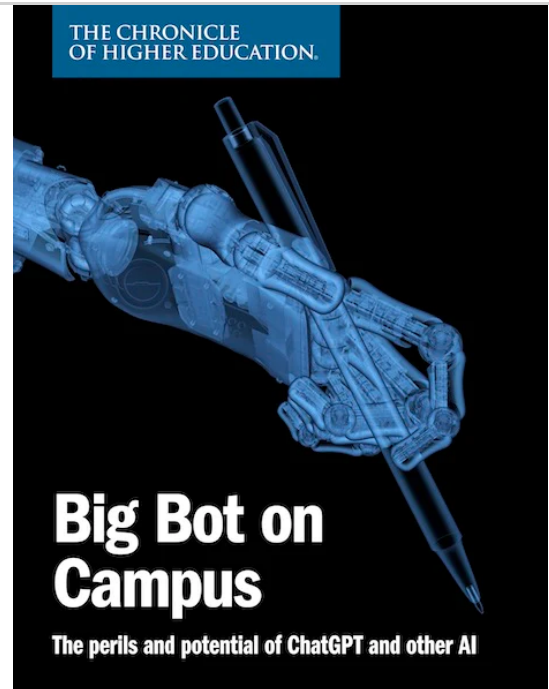
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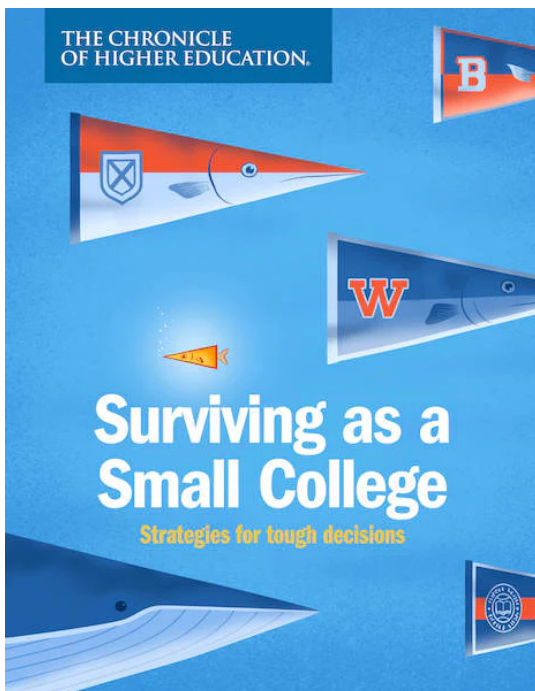
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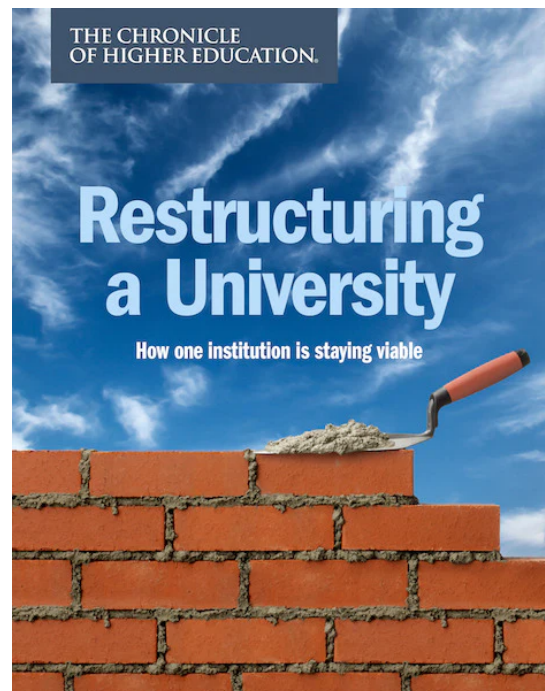
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