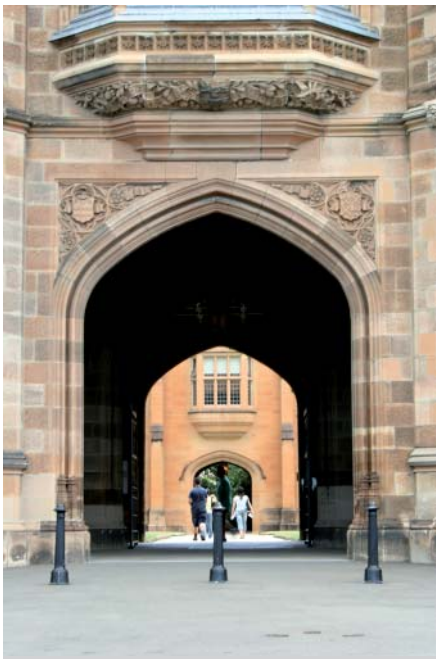
Proprietary intellectuals

Andrew Ryder

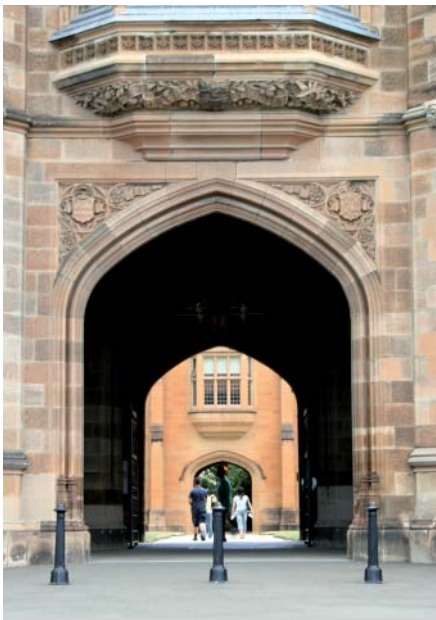


> 'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.'
>
> 'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.'
>
> 'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be the master — that's all.'
>
> Lewis Carroll

Words are ambiguous. Meanings vary according to context, and misunderstandings abound. Words and phrases might make sense individually, but combined in a sentence they can lose sense. However, communication relies on shared understanding, particularly in the academic world. Sharing and exchanging ideas is supposed to be central to the intellectual process, enhancing our ability to explain, decipher and understand. Traditionally, the formation of theories and models involved taking on board competing views, trying to convince those who disagreed that our views were correct. This process of persuasion often exposed flaws in supposedly unassailable paradigms. As a result, advocates of particular models and theories and their opponents often modified or even abandoned their proposals, and new, often radically different ones replaced them. As Karl Popper put it,

> *we can learn from our mistakes* … The way knowledge progresses, and especially our scientific knowledge, is by … anticipations, by guesses, by tentative solutions to our problems, by *conjectures*. These conjectures are controlled by criticism; that is by attempted *refutations*, which include severely critical tests … Criticism of our conjectures is of vital importance: by bringing out our mistakes, it makes us understand the difficulties of the problem we are trying to solve. This is how we become better acquainted with our problem, and able to propose more mature solutions … As we learn from our mistakes, our knowledge grows. (Popper 1963: vii)

However, since the 1940s if not earlier, a new breed of academic has appeared, originally rooted in Marxism. Marxism depended not on observations or 'facts', but on the views of those who, in the words of Marx, 'could see the line of march'. Their superior vision and insights privileged their views and interpretations above all others. Those who disagreed with them were wrong, regardless of the apparent wealth of evidence on their side. Hierarchy and hegemony dominated academic discussion rather than open academic discourse. To disagree with an avowed Marxist was to confirm oneself an outsider and render one's views irrelevant. I recall a conversation among students in which one criticised another's views by saying, 'You have not read Marx's *Grundrisse*'. This was no different from Soviet era eastern Europeans who paid lip service to Marx but interpreted him so as to support the latest party congress or



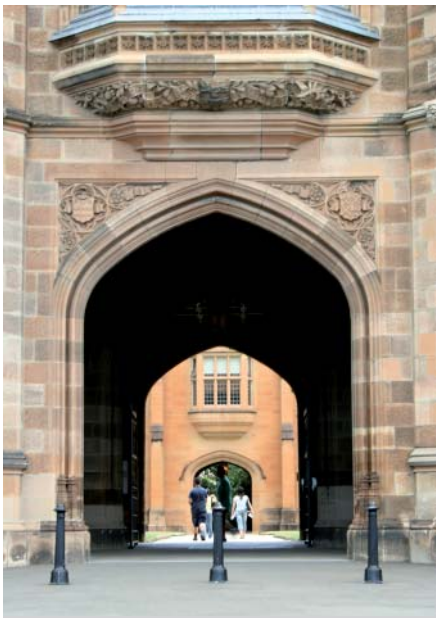
their own stilted views. The ultimate example was Lysenko, the Soviet biologist who insisted that genetics was a capitalist science and had no place in Communist society. Thanks to him, in the 1940s *all* the leading geneticists in the Soviet Union were put to death.

Marxism was widely discredited in the 1980s, but the struggle for intellectual hegemony has continued, often under the banner of post-modernism and post-Marxism, but also in other guises. By virtue of superior insights, some intellectuals claim to be able to understand ideas and interpret the world better than their colleagues. Facts are subjective and ambiguous, and require interpretation by 'experts'.

There is an analogy here with open-source versus proprietary software. The traditional academic model is an open-source one in which ideas are exchanged and enriched through competition and discussion. This resembles the process by which open-source software evolves. Open-source software is often more robust, more fail-safe, and more user-friendly than proprietary software. The post-Marxist academic model, however, is a proprietary one, where brand-wearing intellectuals act as gatekeepers and often as 'owners'. These proprietary intellectuals — one might them microsoft intellectuals — propound theory, interpret facts, and promote doctrines. Proprietary software is opaque and unclear. It is almost impossible to alter, to improve, or to make more user-friendly unless the owner chooses to do so.

If an article or a book cannot be easily understood the first time around, is it worth trying to read it again? Perhaps not. Often, it seems that obscure writing aims to inhibit, not promote, open discussion; to protect and insulate arguments and viewpoints from broader intellectual and academic debate rather than to advance knowledge. Obscurity is not profound, it is simply obscure. It does not lend authority or gravitas to pronouncements. Obscure meanings and the misuse of language inhibit communication and force people to work within a narrow frame of reference, just as proprietary software forces users to work in a technological straitjacket. Those leading the battle for intellectual hegemony rely on obscurantism and incomprehensibility for support. They implicitly argue that those who disagree with them are not merely wrong, but too stupid to understand their message. Their writing is often turgid, their meanings ambiguous, and their interpretations suspect.

Lewis Carroll, quoted above, thought that writers *could* be the masters of words, but only if the words were defined at the outset, and used throughout in the same meaning (Carroll 1998: 186, footnote 9). Ambiguity allows proprietary intellectuals to backtrack or revise their opinion without changing their words. Their excuse is that they need new terms to describe what purport to be new concepts. However, why create a new word or term if an old one will do? It is true that when writing for people in a particular field, academics often use technical shorthand to describe things. For example, in economics, writers refer to the Harrod Domar model, or to the Kaldor–Hicks criterion. There is a difference, however, in using technical terms to refer to models and concepts which are widely known and understood (albeit sometimes only within their



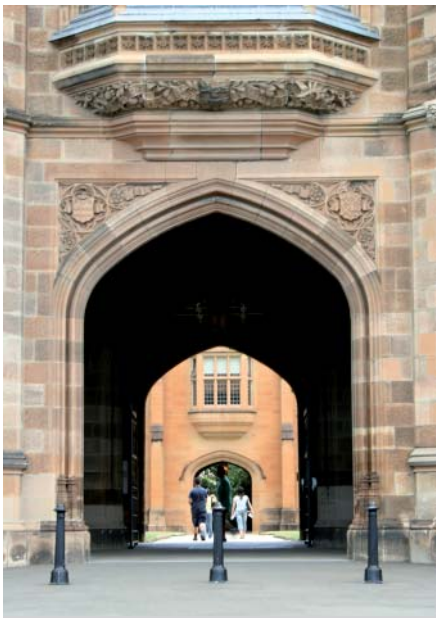
field), and in using terms which are *always* obscure, ambiguous and impossible to define.

We like to think of intellectual life as being apolitical and open, but the rise of proprietary intellectuals shows that it is not. In many disciplines, such individuals are negligible, but in some, they have hijacked intellectual discourse. They constitute self-referential sects, promoting their world views and excluding others. They may alienate readers, but library subscription fees, conference grants, and other forms of inbreeding ensure their short-term survival. Like an academic Taliban, they claim the sole right to interpret the Koran or Bible, denouncing other interpretations as false and even blasphemous. Here we come full circle, back to those who can best see and interpret 'the line of march', rendering all other views irrelevant. However, although scholars often write in an academic context, we are not just writing for the 'academy' but also for a broader audience. This includes our students and the general public, people we want to reach out to, to influence, and to persuade.

Most people see the emperor's new clothes, or lack of them, and ignore academic fundamentalists. Impenetrable writing alienates them, and in the process can render individual disciplines and sub-disciplines irrelevant to broader intellectual and policy debates. Unfortunately, in some countries and in some disciplines, proprietary intellectualism is encouraged. For example, in the United Kingdom, research output is not graded on the number of times a work is cited, or on the esteem in which a publication is held, but on the type of publication. Articles in so-called refereed journals are considered of higher quality than other types of publications, and some journals are considered more prestigious than others. Worse, the evaluation of output is left to a panel of so-called experts, self-appointed and self-renewing.

When proprietary intellectuals hijack entire fields, they stifle innovation and change. Writing for an ever-decreasing circle of 'expert' adherents and their followers, they may win a battle but lose the war, ultimately threatening their academic and even intellectual survival. As their relevance disappears, many have gone further down the route of obscurity, creating new branches of pseudo-science with new terminologies and expressions to create more barriers to prevent outsiders coming in and to justify their roles as gatekeepers. They have justified their attempts to balkanise their fields by invoking intellectual sources, such as Foucault, Derrida, Althusser, Baudrillard, Irigaray (quoted below — is it possible for a nuclear weapon to use an equation?), and others. Academic discussion becomes a debate about meanings and interpretations, a process of navel gazing and intellectual word-games, rather than a quest for the advancement of knowledge.

> Is E = Mc2 a sexed equation? Perhaps it is. Let us make the hypothesis that it is insofar as it privileges the speed of light over other speeds that are vitally necessary to us. What seems to me to indicate the possibly sexed nature of the equation is not directly its uses by nuclear weapons, rather it is having privileged what goes the fastest. (Irigaray, 1987 taken from Sokal and Bricmont, 1998: 100)

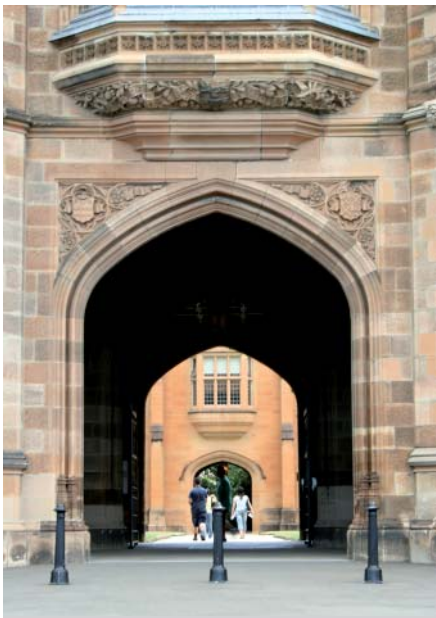


The pervasiveness of this type of academic discourse may reflect the fact that many intellectuals are uncomfortable without boundaries and restrictions. Just as the collapse of empires spawns new states, the gradual collapse of Marxism caused the fragmentation of many fields, spawning new divisions and new debates as many academics searched for what Sokal and Bricmont (1998: 178) called a new 'argument from authority'. Perhaps the reason for the search can be understood in terms of the concept of *anomie*. *Anomie* is a sense of uncertainty caused by the collapse of social institutions which restrict choice and impose order in our lives. Over one hundred years ago, the sociologist Emile Durkheim (1897) argued that *anomie* led to an increase in suicides because large numbers of people could not live without boundaries. Perhaps many intellectuals like living in an intellectual straitjacket or an academic ghetto.

In some ways, this is also about geography: the geography of intellectual space, the creation of new borders, and the seizure of parts of the intellectual commons. This can be illustrated by an example from my current field, geography. Since the nineteenth century, economic geographers have been interested in the factors underlying industrial location, the location of shops and services, and economic development in general. This work is widely used to locate shopping centres and stores, but from the 1970s onwards, it was denounced as 'positivistic' by a new breed of geographer. They claimed that it was simplistic, 'privileged' one type of data over another, was subjective, and mechanical. These geographers attempted to invent a new economic geography based on concepts borrowed from sociology. In the meantime, mainstream economists, including Krugman (1995), Venables and Fujita (1999) rediscovered the importance of space — that is, of geography — in economic affairs. They mined the earlier work done by geographers, expanding on it and refining it. Far from welcoming this addition of new thinking, many geographers denounced this as a move to usurp their intellectual space. Similarly, in 1991, Greece denounced the use of the name Macedonia by the Yugoslav republic of Macedonia as it moved towards independence. Due to Greek protests, it is still called 'the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia'. However, as well as the independent nation of Luxembourg, there is a Belgian province of the same name.

Martin (1999) wrote that 'it must be rare for a major new development in one discipline to define itself by appropriating the label of another discipline. Yet that is precisely what is happening in economics … a so-called "new economic geography" has emerged.' He claimed that 'the "new economic geography" is wholly at variance with the intellectual thrust of contemporary economic geography proper', adding that its supporters 'make no reference to the work of economic geographers'. However, he admitted that what he called proper economic geography 'lacks clarity and rigour, that fuzzy notions such as post-Fordism provide little incisive insight', and finished by writing that

> One litmus test, perhaps is whether and how far our work is taken seriously by and has an impact on policy makers. The 'new economic geographers' ' … models have begun to attract the attention of key



> policy organisations and governments … Not a single economic … geographer has been involved in these discussions.

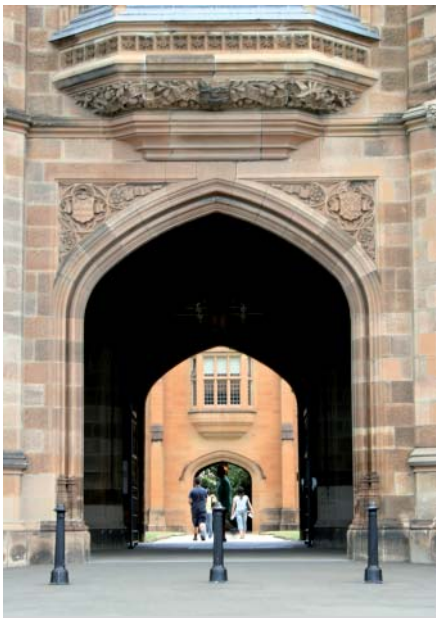
The shallowness of many concepts becomes most apparent when one attempts to translate them into another language or explain their meaning to a broader audience. Even terms which seem relatively easy to understand, such as post-Fordism, lose their meaning when one starts to unpack them. For example, if Fordist methods of production are dead, then why are computer chips made the way they are, or chilled foods, or Levi jeans? True, some of these products are made overseas, but that does not mean production is post-Fordist. The assembly line method of production has spread, and the world is more Fordist than ever.

Obscure writing is an attempt to stifle intellectual freedom, to balkanise the intellectual world, and to hijack disciplines. There are parallels with the democratic process. In the 1950s and 60s, Charles Lindblom (1965) wrote about what he called 'the intelligence of democracy'. American democracy is traditionally based on discussion, compromise and consensus. Mirroring Popper's statement, quoted earlier about how knowledge progresses, political scientists argued that policy making involves listening to and taking on board competing views, trying to convince those who disagree that policies are right. This process often exposes flaws in proposed policies. When advocates of different policies become aware of weaknesses in them, they change their views. Political scientists have suggested that although this slows down the decision-making process, it ensures that policies and decisions are more robust and more widely accepted.

Recently, many in the United States and elsewhere have expressed a post-liberal impatience with the democratic process, suggesting that this method of decision making is a barrier to direct action. This impatience is a defining characteristic of many political regimes. Leaders argue that they have access to the broader picture, and are therefore correct. Those who oppose them are wrong. This intolerance of debate characterises many proprietary intellectuals, as does the view that because of superior access to information and greater ability, they can somehow see 'the line of march'.

Who is to say what constitutes a given field? What gives someone the authority to do so? If the ideas of proprietary intellectuals are as penetrating, original, and innovative as they claim, they should not need the protection of ambiguity, specialised vocabularies, and gatekeepers. Despite their claims to be revolutionary or forward looking, many proprietary intellectuals are backward-looking conservatives, who would use peer pressure to turn back the intellectual clock, to retard innovation and to control change. As Schumpeter put it, old views are 'embedded in protecting relationships ... [They] may be losing ground for years without … [backers] becoming uneasy' (1934: 241).

Ultimately, the success or failure of proprietary intellectuals depends on us, the broader intellectual and academic community. Many of us feel what Albert Hirschman (1971) called *loyalty* and a sense of belonging to



our disciplines. In that case, we can try to change our fields from within, exercising what Hirschman called *voice*, through publications, through conferences, through joining editorial boards, by engaging with our subject, and by speaking out against intellectual tyranny. However, to use Hirschman's framework, we can also exit. When an academic field is hijacked, it can be difficult to change things from within. Writing about business innovation, the economist Schumpeter suggested that,

> The history of science is one great confirmation of the fact that … thought turns again and again into the accustomed track even if it has become unsuitable … any deviating conduct by a member of a social group is condemned … Surmounting this opposition is always a special kind of task … (1934: 86–7)

We can migrate from our fields and rebrand ourselves. We can boycott journals which sponsor proprietary articles. We can reach out to alternative sources — which is crucial if we want to make our voices heard. In some countries, like the UK, this is more problematic than in others, but even UK academics can find journals which are respected even though they do not publish jargon and double-talk. In addition, we can and should publish on the internet and through working papers.

On the one hand, we have a responsibility to remain open and impartial. On the other hand, we are under no obligation to walk around naked in the intellectual new clothes of academic bullies. It is time to demand clear writing, and to turn our backs on those who would try to balkanise and destroy the academic community.

References

Carroll, Lewis, *Through the Looking Glass*, Penguin Books, London, 1998 (first published 1865).

Durkheim, Emile, *Suicide: A study in sociology*, edited with an introduction by George Simpson, translated by John A. Spaulding and George Simpson, Free Press, New York, 1997 (first published 1897).

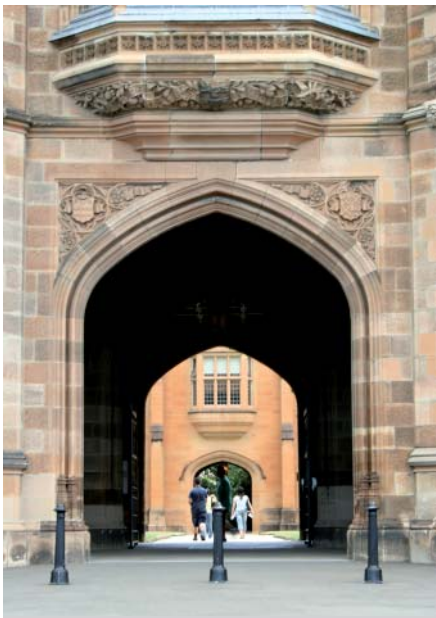
Fujita, Masahisa, Paul Krugman and Anthony J. Venables, *The Spatial Economy : Cities, regions, and international trade*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1999.

Hirschman, Albert Otto, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to decline in firms, organizations, and states*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1970.

Irigaray, Luce, 'Sujet de la Science, Sujet sexé?', in *Sens et Place des Connaissances Dans la Société*, pp. 95–121, Centre national de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris, 1987.

Krugman, Paul R., *Development, Geography, and Economic Theory*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1995.

Lindblom, Charles E., *The Intelligence of Democracy*, Free Press, Collier-Macmillan, New York, 1965.



Martin, Ron, 'Editorial: The "New Economic Geography": Challenge or Irrelevance?', in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, New Series, Vol. 24, No. 4., 1999, pp. 387–91.

Popper, Karl, *Conjectures and Refutations: The growth of scientific knowledge*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1963.

Schumpeter, Joseph A., translated from the 1926 German edition, *The Theory of Economic Development*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1934.

Sokal, Alan D. Jean Bricmont, *Intellectual Impostures: Postmodern philosophers' abuse of science*, Profile, Cambridge, 1998.

back **next**