Stephen Macedo was invested as a member of the American Academy of Sciences and Letters in 2024.

In this video, Academy Executive Director Greg Forster interviews Dr. Macedo about why political disagreements are intensifying and truth-telling is getting harder, and the complex relationship between democracy and expertise.

Greg Forster, American Academy of Sciences and Letters

Hello, I'm Greg Forster with the American Academy of Sciences and Letters, and here with me today is one of our Academy members, Stephen Macedo of Princeton University. Stephen, thank you so much for being with us.

Stephen Macedo, Princeton University

I'm very happy to do this. Thank you.

Forster

My first question is, could you give us some examples of people in your field or related fields who have demonstrated intellectual courage?

Macedo

I'm a political theorist in a social science department, and I can think of a couple of examples of people who have been influential on my recent work on the COVID pandemic, and more broadly, on American politics. One is someone I've never met before, Cory J. Clark, who's a student of Philip Tetlock at the University of Pennsylvania. They're social psychologists. I believe that Cory now works at New College in Florida and is the author of many papers on issues related to political bias in scholarship and research. Her coauthors include Academy members like Steven Pinker and Lee Jussim, probably among others. I found them very valuable in illuminating the ways in which professoriate researchers exhibit some of the biases, not surprisingly, that reflect the intensely polarized nature of the American political community at the moment. It's hardly surprising since we're political people, we're interested in politics and we're shaped by that environment. One paper I've quoted in presentations on COVID has several authors, but Clark is the leading author. The title is “Pro-Social Motives Underlie Scientific Censorship by Scientists.” It's from the *Proceedings of the National Academies of Sciences*, a very prestigious journal, in fall 2023.

Among the things they find is that 96 percent of statistical errors directionally supported scientists' hypotheses, suggesting credulity among scholars toward favorable outcomes. They've surveyed lots of scholarship and come to these conclusions. Scientific censorship is often driven by prosocial concerns for the well-being of human social groups. Scientific journals are now explicitly endorsing moral concerns as legitimate reasons to suppress science. Very important public-facing journals, authors, reviewers and editors must consider the potentially harmful implications of research. That's editorial in nature. On that, the Clark et al. article comments, in effect, that editors are granting themselves vast leeway to censor high-quality research that offends their own moral sensibilities. Those kinds of possibilities are liable to be politically inflected, of course.

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This is a problem that we ignore at our peril. We need to be much more alert to the ways in which we are in a very politicized environment, and we need to be alert to our own biases. It's amazing how many scholars study political bias in the general population – cognitive biases, epistemic biases, shortcomings, confirmation bias – and yet too infrequently do we bring those observations to bear reflexively on our own communities. Scholars are very often like-minded, intensely concerned about political issues, and that's bound to affect scholarship in some ways.

Forster

We must examine ourselves under the same microscope that we use to examine others, if only for reasons of fair play.

Macedo

Absolutely. I would go deeper than that. The fundamental value of the academy, of the universities, science, journalism, is fair-minded truth-telling. We betray our own deepest values if we're not alert to our own biases, and the ways in which they're liable to be affected by the more general environment in which we work.

Forster

It isn't that science doesn't care about human well-being. The reason we study is because we want to fulfill our nature as human beings, both as knowers and as people who want to be useful to others. But those scientific norms of truth-telling and disinterestedness and letting the chips fall where they may intellectually, that also is necessary. It's prosocial, in a sense.

Macedo

Absolutely. In other words, any convictions that we have about the connections between particular policies and improved human outcomes have to be regarded as contingent, pending further investigation, pending further debate, including careful empirical debate about consequences and causes, but also normative debate about what the relevant values are. During COVID, there was a popular slogan: follow the science. Well, the science was uncertain, and not acknowledging that was deeply flawed. But science can't tell us what to do. Policy choices always involve value judgments and trade-offs. Some people win, some people lose, and there are costs and benefits, and there was not nearly enough attention given to those dimensions.

Forster

That open exchange is necessary not only because we want to be knowers, we want to discover truth, but also because we want to be in good relationships with other people who think differently.

I could talk about that all day, but I need to move on to my next question: what do you think are one or two biggest challenges in your field right now for maintaining high intellectual standards?

Macedo

I've already begun to touch on them. I'll just say a couple more words about that in light of a book that I'm reading now, actually written by the president of my university, Christopher L. Eisgruber. It's called

Terms of Respect: How Colleges Get Free Speech Right. It's a troubling book. I've known President Eisgruber for many decades, and he has the right values. But one of the things he observes in talking about today's students on campus, pushing back against the idea that students are snowflakes is what we're just talking about: that you have to remember that students are living in the wider political world that we're all living in. They're subject to the intense influences of polarization and intense political commitment, and also the influences of social media, which amplify disagreements. The algorithms have recognized that outrage, upset, other side, anger, maintain people's eyes on the screen and generate more clicks. They've been called machines and that sort of thing. He's correct that what we observe as more intense political disagreement on campuses among students owes partly to this wider political influence on the context in which students are operating. He's correct that we have vibrant debates in almost all instances on campuses. Then people tend to think a certain number of bad examples that are deeply, deeply correct will nevertheless not be repeated very often.

I would suggest that self-reflection on the ways in which students are affected by the wider political environment or even saw too is much here, is true of professors too. We need a bit more reflection on the ways in which our fields of all sorts are affected by those wider influences. There's a much stronger identification now between having a four-year college degree, having a graduate degree across the fields, with membership in the Democratic Party than several decades ago. That also matters. The issues we're talking about have partisan dimensions very often. The fact that the educated elite in the country have become much more associated inside of the political spectrum, just as a matter of correlation, it also gives rise to special challenges toward that kind of fair-minded self-reflection that you mentioned makes it hard.

Forster

Right. We are not brains in jars. We are affected by our environment the same as our students. You also highlighted that things are not always as bad as they seem. Reformers have a tendency to constantly exaggerate a problem in hopes of motivating people to deal with the problem. But it can have the opposite effect. It can create despair, right? The problem's too big. It can't be dealt with.

Macedo That's right. To some extent, we saw that with the pandemic, though, I guess I'd mention a topic that I don't really know that much about. People have suggested to us after our book on the COVID pandemic came out, that it parallels climate science. It's not something I've studied, but I have looked at a very interesting book by Steven Koonin. He's a former professor, and I believe provost at Caltech, who served as an energy advisor in the Obama energy department. His point is not that climate change is not happening, and he's not doubting that humans contribute to climate change. We don't have to fix it, he says, on the balance between human contributions and natural contributions. But he also thinks that proposals that have been put forward are dealing with maybe doubtful with respect to cost-benefit analysis. That's another area where there's a kind of parting line. There probably needs to be more openness to critical voices. Though I say that without being an expert on that particular policy question, it'd be something more interesting to look at.

Forster

Keeping those procedural rules in place is necessary for credibility, if nothing else.

Let me ask you my last question. How would you describe the mission of the university, and why is it important?

Macedo

The mission of the university, and there's broad agreement on this, is truth-seeking. We're given the benefits of protection and tenure, and we spend our time teaching and researching, doing a lot of administration, too, as it often turns out. But the cores are teaching and research, or, depending on where you are, research and teaching. The point is to permit people, as a kind of full-time job, the great privilege of asking questions, pursuing scholarly questions, immersing themselves in disciplines that have developed over the course of time. That's important in itself, to pursue the truth, but it's also important to democracy. Democracy needs expertise. Robert Post, law professor at Yale, has written a very good book, he's written many things, but this is very short, and to the point, *Democracy, Expertise, Academic Freedom*. He points out the intimate connection between academic freedom and the expertise that democracy needs, because expertise is disciplinary. We've organized fields of knowledge into academic disciplines, and the standards that are applied in publishing research, in funding research, all important areas of government funding research, and the sciences and so on, the standards that are applied are developed in disciplines. It's hugely important that those disciplines be in good shape if the academy is to play its public role in contributing to the knowledge that is necessary for constitutional democracies to select and revise good policies.

This is all in the 1915 and subsequent declarations of the American Academy of University Professors, the pursuit of truth, pursuit of teaching. The third fundamental role of academics, which is not as often emphasized, is advising on public policy matters. That has to be done in a fair-minded way, in a self-critical way and in a way that's, as you said, fair to both sides, so that we can maintain the trust of the public. There have certainly been unfair attacks on universities and on science. Misinformation is not fake. There is real misinformation. There have also been ways in which professors and journalists and scientists themselves have not fully lived up to their own standards. We need to be more self-critical and do a better job of playing our role according to our own deepest values.

Forster I

I agree with you that the university is uniquely needed for democracies, as opposed to other types of political regimes. When you emphasize the role of expertise, it makes me think of what Aristotle says in *Politics*, the weakness of aristocracies is they want everything in all of life to run on the aristocratic principle. And the weakness of democracies is they want everything in all of life to run on the democratic principle, right? They want to have a vote on everything. The concept of expertise runs against the popular passion in democracy that everybody gets an equal vote. Expertise is not about 51 percent of the public thinks that two and two make five. So, in a sense, the university embodies that Aristotelian principle that you have to have a kind of quasi-aristocracy if you want your democracy to stay democratic.

Macedo

You're right about that. But on the other hand, I would say that science has probably been at its strongest in the modern constitutional democracies as we know them. In authoritarian regimes, science is liable to be corrupted by political motives. I'm not denying Aristotle's insight. You could say that ours is a mixed

regime in that sense. But modern liberal democracies have furnished very fertile ground for the pursuit of science. In many ways, science has never been healthier. People do prize science. In some ways, during the COVID pandemic, we placed too much trust in scientific elites. We offloaded too many decisions onto public health experts rather than political leaders who had broad responsibility for thinking about the public good as a whole, not just reducing the amount of disease in society.

My coauthor Frances Lee and I write about that in our book, *In COVID's Wake*, if you don't mind my getting in a plug. Political leaders during the pandemic had an incentive to offload responsibility saying, no, I'm not making these decisions. I'm deferring to the scientific experts here. That was an evasion of responsibility. It was an evasion of political responsibility. But it was permitted or facilitated by high levels of trust in science at the time by much of the public. Aristotle's insights are obviously perfectly valid at some level.

But these things can be reconciled. We need more self-criticism among academics and scientists, more willingness to admit error and more humility, more willingness to admit the limits of our knowledge. Academic and scientific work has made enormous advances. But we shouldn't exaggerate the amount of certainty we have when it comes to policy. In a very good book by Gil Eyal, called *The Crisis of Expertise*, he notes that part of the problem is that pure research can perhaps have an ideal of conjecture and refutation and so on. But when science enters the realm of policy and makes recommendations, there's a tendency to circle the wagons once a policy recommendation has been made and to think that consensus becomes an imperative rather than questioning the policy that's been settled on. That's itself a real problem when science advises policy. We need scientists to advise policy. But we need to think about the characteristic problems that may arise.

Forster

All of that is very fair. Also, when Aristotle talked about democracy, he did not mean liberal democratic democracy like we have. He meant a direct unlimited democracy. That's relevant as well.

Stephen, thank you so much for being with us.

Macedo

Well, thank you. This has been a delightful conversation. All the best.