

„The Skeptics Syndrome“ in Retrospect: 22 Years Later

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I would like to focus my retrospective considerations on three aspects: (a) What do I see differently in retrospect today than I did then? (b) What reactions did the essay “The Skeptics Syndrome” trigger? (c) How has the “Skeptical Movement” changed since then?

It should be said in advance that the 1998 text “The Skeptics Syndrome” is certainly to be seen in connection with an essay written two years later “Why ‘Skeptic’ Movements Need Criticism” – a 24-page, review-like overview of 61 other critical publications on the ‘Skeptic’ movement, which I had compiled in a 460-page reader (Wunder, 2000). Many of the publications contained therein (e. g. Bauer, 1989; Dossey, 1998; Hansen, 1992; Hess, 1993; Honorton, 1993; Irwin, 1989; Kammann, 1982; Lippard, 1990; McConnell & Clark, 1982; Pinch & Collins, 1984; Radin, 1997; Rawlins, 1981; Rockwell et al., 1978; Truzzi, 1979a,b, 1980, 1998; Westrum, 1976) are still essential reading today for understanding the “skeptical” movement in the first 25 years of its existence (1975–2000). The own impressions described in “The Skeptics Syndrome”, which I gained through participatory observation, essentially converged with the findings from the literature compiled in the reader.

What Do I See Differently Today in Retrospect?

The 22 years since I wrote “The Skeptics Syndrome” have been a long time, during which both my focusses of interest and my assessments of many topics have changed several times. I am one of those people for whom changes of opinion and perspective have often taken place, but never in the form of a sudden conversion. It always took place slowly and in such a way that I tried to think through various competing reality constructions in parallel and as thoroughly as possible and thus internalized them – without ever fully identifying myself with any of them. This makes the change from one reality construction, which is still dominant in subjective consciousness, to another easier because it is hardly ever complicated by questions of one’s own identity. Slow shifts in the assessment of the respective plausibilities can then smoothly lead to a gradual

8 See footnote 2.

change in the dominant reality construction – without any “tipping point” being clearly fixed in time. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann described this mode of changing the construction of reality in their sociological classic *The Social Construction of Reality*, published in 1966:

[T]he individual may internalize different realities *without* identifying with them. Therefore, if an alternative world appears in secondary socialization, the individual may opt for it in a manipulative manner. One could speak here of “cool” alternation. The individual internalizes the new reality, but instead of its being *his* reality, it is a reality to be used by him for specific purposes. In so far as this involves the performance of certain roles, he retains subjective detachment *vis-à-vis* them – he “puts them on” deliberately and purposefully (Berger & Luckmann, 1991: 192).

This depicts my dealing with reality constructions of various kinds quite well, also on topics of anomalism and “skepticism”.

My change at that time from a person still strongly corresponding to the mental set of the “skeptics syndrome” around 1990 to a “skeptic towards the skeptics” would have been hardly conceivable without such a mode of thinking. Weighing up all the known information, over time the self-image prevalent in the “skeptic” milieu has simply turned out to be less plausible than the descriptions of the so-called “skeptics” made from a social distance by their critics. So I switched from one role to the next. A necessary prerequisite was, of course, an excessive curiosity to deal with the competing reality construction in detail and to internalize it “on a trial basis”.

After another 22 years in the mode of such thinking, I now feel several lives ahead. Some formulations contained in “The Skeptics Syndrome” I would choose differently today. For example, today I always try to avoid the term “scientific”, because I believe that in discussions it does not contribute to analytical clarity, but rather to confusion – considering its manifold and contradictory connotations. The students in my seminars are always advised to delete the term “scientific” from their vocabulary, because they should strive for analytically clear statements. Accordingly, I have become very careful with terms derived from it, such as “parascience”.

Wunder’s “Skeptics Syndrome” (1998) is conceived as a polythetic set of certain characteristics. I still find this approach convincing, but from today’s point of view I lack a hierarchization of the features and a theoretical reconstruction of the functional relationships between the features. This is partly made up for in Wunder (2000), but is also too unsystematic there.

Despite all the criticism in detail, the structural characteristics and problems of “skeptical organizations” as collective actors, which have been worked out in “The Skeptics Syndrome”, are well met also from my current perspective. In essence, they already result from the factual founding document of the “skeptical” movement, the founding appeal formulated by Paul

Kurtz with an invitation to the CSICOP founding conference on May 1, 1976 on the topic “The New Irrationalism: Antiscience and Pseudoscience”. This reads:

There has been an enormous increase in public interest in psychic phenomena, the occult, and pseudoscience. Radio, television, newspaper, books, and magazines are presenting the case for psychic healing, psychokinesis, immortality, reincarnation, Kirlian photography, orgone energy, psychic surgery, faith healing, astrology, the Chariots of the Gods, UFOs, Dianetics, astral projection, exorcism, poltergeists, and the “talents” of Uri Geller, Edgar Cayce, and Jeane Dixon. Often, the least shred of evidence for these claims is blown out of proportion and presented as “scientific” proof.

Many individuals now believe that there is considerable need to organize some strategy of refutation. Perhaps we ought not to assume that the scientific enlightenment will continue indefinitely; for all we know, like the Hellenic civilization, it may be overwhelmed by irrationalism, subjectivism, and obscurantism. Perhaps antiscientific and pseudoscientific irrationalism is only a passing fashion; yet one of the best ways to deal with it is for the scientific and educational community to respond – in a responsible manner – to its alarming growth. (<https://skepticalinquirer.org/history-of-csicop/>)

From this founding document can be deduced:

1. The actual motive of the movement is a strong public interest in certain issues that is perceived as disturbing. There is no need to initiate or conduct research on these theses in the scientific community, because there is no mention of this anywhere.
2. It does not emphasize the need to differentiate these different theses and conceptual systems and not to make sweeping judgments; on the contrary, they are placed indiscriminately in a long line and from the outset and sweepingly labelled with terms such as “irrationalism”, “pseudoscience”, “obscurantism” or “hostility to science”.
3. The declared goal is a “strategy of refutation” that aims to influence public opinion. The short interjection that this has to be done “in a responsible manner” is unsubstantiated and thus left to everyone’s own understanding; it is not the focus of the considerations.
4. An apocalyptic-looking threat to our civilization is constituted, which is in danger of being overwhelmed by dark forces of “irrationalism” – a central motive for mobilization. An extremely comprehensive conglomeration of competing world interpretations is subsumed under this threat.

Those premises that were already prominent in the founding document of the “skeptical” movement are to be regarded as its central “program”. The sets of mental traits and structural problems of the corresponding organizations, as shown in “The Skeptics Syndrome”, are ultimately only inevitable consequences of the communalization of individuals whose essential common

denominator is to share these premises. For a “strategy of refutation” is incompatible with offering forums to those who, within this construction of reality, pursue the downfall of modern civilization, either through an open dialogue or by making resources available. The ingroup-outgroup polarization with its groupthink problems and other pathologies presented in “The Skeptics Syndrome” are quasi preprogrammed on such a basis. Although such movements aim to exert sociopolitical influence in their self-image, their actual function is primarily merely to stabilize the identities of their followers and to pass on their own ideologies. This is why an identity-generating self-designation such as “skeptical” is so important.

Reactions to “The Skeptics Syndrome”

One consequence of “The Skeptics Syndrome” being put on the Internet was that I still receive – 22 years later! – about half a dozen inquiries per year from persons, who feel personally attacked or damaged by the GWUP and ask for advice, how they should deal with this organization. (Paradoxical: I don’t remember ever receiving calls from people, in my time as GWUP contact person in the 1990s, who felt damaged by those “parasciences”, against which the GWUP fights until today). Others ask if I know which hidden groups “are actually behind this organization” to finance their campaigns. Extremist political groups or the pharmaceutical industry are often suspected in the background. My information that, even more than 20 years after my separating from the GWUP, I have no evidence that this “skeptical” organization is “externally controlled” by whomever and I am rather convinced that their acting can best be understood by their inherent internal logic alone, does not satisfy all of them. Because many experience the acting of the GWUP as irrational; they cannot understand their latent aggressiveness and intolerance.

How did the GWUP itself react to the publication of “The Skeptics Syndrome”? Before the establishment of the Internet, there was generally no reaction at all from “skeptical” organizations in comparable cases; they relied on stubborn non-discussion in order not to attract additional attention. For example, there was no public response from CSICOP to the criticism made by Truzzi (1979a, 1979b, 1980). Since “The Skeptics Syndrome” was permanently available on the Internet, however, the GWUP soon felt compelled in 1999 to place a text on its homepage, in which not “The Skeptics Syndrome” was discussed, though, but my leaving the GWUP which was called a “throwing out”. This text – without author designation – argued that there were no substantive points of contention between the GWUP and me at all; rather, the separation was merely due to “personal differences”. The text aimed at justifying the so-called “throwing out”, but avoided any discussion of the critical analysis presented in “The Skeptics Syndrome”. However, it is completely independent of my person whether the characterization of “skeptical” organizations contained therein is true or not. Just as irrelevant is the question who was “thrown out” when and why. In the subsequent years the text was revised several times substantially by

the GWUP author not made recognizable, but always only referring to my person, never aiming at a substantive discussion of the diagnosis of “The Skeptics Syndrome”. In the final version I was accused – in complete contrast to the first version – of having taken an “anti-skeptical stance” already “several years” before my separation from the GWUP and of having carried out “many years subversive activity as an anomalistic mole” in the GWUP. I allegedly had left the GWUP out of “personal disappointment”, because the executive committee was able to assert itself in the content-related dispute with me about the rejection of the “anti-skeptical attitude” or about an “anomalistic GWUP” allegedly wanted by me “basically from the beginning” (!). This obviously made any occupation with the concrete remarks in “The Skeptics Syndrome” unnecessary for the unnamed author writing in the name of the GWUP executive committee.

In other public statements – e. g. regarding the 2003 GWUP leaving of Stephan Matthiesen –, three further argumentation patterns can be identified in order to avoid having to deal seriously with practiced criticism, as in “The Skeptics Syndrome”.

- Firstly, it was argued that the criticism leveled at “skeptical” organizations applies equally to other organizations. – Even if this were so (it was not substantiated however), it would in no way improve the diagnosis given to the “skeptical” organizations.
- The second justification was that the “consumer protection” and the dangerousness of parasciences do not permit “misunderstood pluralism” in the GWUP, which is in a tough battle with powerful opponents. Dialogue with dissidents is boring and does not serve the media relations of the GWUP. – That is more probably a confirmation than a rebuttal of the diagnosis placed in “The Skeptics Syndrome”.
- Thirdly it was criticized that it was inaccurate and inappropriate to accuse all members of the GWUP generally of dogmatism. – This shows that the text “The Skeptics Syndrome” was read at best superficially, because such an accusation was not raised at all. Quite the contrary: From the only diagram included in “The Skeptics Syndrome” and the added explanations in the text, it is quite clear that I assume that the entire spectrum from “dogmatism” to “open-mindedness” occurs within the GWUP membership, and, with regard to this personality characteristic of individuals within the GWUP, there are thus both dogmatic and undogmatic members. The criticism made in “The Skeptics Syndrome” was quite different. Anyone who is willing to take a serious look at it instead of falling into a defensive posture should quickly realize that.

Until today I am not aware of one serious controversy from members of the GWUP dealing with the problems specified in “The Skeptics Syndrome”. “The Skeptics Syndrome” was and is a strongly tabooed topic within the GWUP.

How Has the “Skeptical” Movement Changed Since Then?

All social communities develop over time. It cannot be assumed unquestionably that the diagnosis placed in 1998 even applies today to the GWUP. Since 2008 I no longer have substantial access to GWUP-internal sources and follow the development only from the outside and increasingly superficially. Although the public announcements of the GWUP are still completely compatible with the problem outline in “The Skeptics Syndrome”, it would nevertheless be presumptuous not to exercise caution in judgement here. Therefore I am glad that with Timm Grams’ (2021, this issue) account an updated insight into the “inner space” of the GWUP is presented, which also no longer feels bound to identity-forming narratives and group loyalties, and in this respect has a free view.

I would like to briefly mention just two developments in the “skeptical” movement over the past 20 years that strike me as significant from an outside perspective. First, in the last 20 years the relationship of the “skeptical” movement with regard to religion has clearly shifted, also institutionally. Second, the range of issues addressed by the “skeptical” movement has broadly opened over the past two decades. The former narrow focus on “paranormal” is a thing of the past; instead, it is assumed that one can deal with almost any topic in a well-founded way because one’s “critical thinking” qualifies one to do so. What “skeptical” movements deal with today, in this respect, goes far beyond the subject area of anomalistics. Both developments are definitely connected with each other.

First of all, religion. I wrote about this 20 years ago (Wunder, 2000: 22f.):

A very special topic is the relationship of the “skeptical” movement to religion. Ultimately, this is only a special case of an even more comprehensive topic, namely the problem of which questions can still be answered with scientific methods and which are beyond their reach. Max Weber, in his well-known essay “Science as a Profession,” took the view, dominant in the scientific establishment today, that science must exercise strict modesty and restraint here, since it simply cannot provide any answers to normative questions such as “What should we do?” or “How should we live?”. CSICOP Chairman Paul Kurtz takes a very different view [...] According to Kurtz (1994a: 262), the task of “skeptical” organizations is “to develop an awareness that the methods of science should not only be used in the narrow domains of the specialized sciences, but should also be generalized, as far as possible, to other fields of human interest ..., to extend the critical methods of science further, especially to ethics, politics, and religion.” A science understood in terms of this “skepticism,” according to Kurtz, “can contribute substantially to ... the moral progress of humankind, ... (it) provides a positive and constructive eupraxophy that can assist us in interpreting the cosmos in which we live and in achieving some wisdom in conduct” (1994b: 140), it even provides “transcultural values”: “prima facie ethical principles and rules that may be generalizable to all human communities. Therefore, the methods of skeptical inquiry can be applied to the political and economic domain in which we frame

judgements of practice. Indeed, it is possible to develop a eupraxophy ... to provide a generalized interpretation of the cosmos and some conceptions of the good life” (ibid.: 141). From such and similar quotations the strongly ideological character of this “skepticism” becomes clear. The concept of science claimed by him and its claim to validity go far beyond what is still considered justifiable by the majority in the established science and academia today. Here, the concept of “scientism” might come into play, which the *Europäische Enzyklopädie zu Philosophie und Wissenschaften* defines as the “attempt to align all areas of human activity with the principles of scientific rationality” (Krausch, 1990). Scientism is also characterized there as “an attitude of mind that absolutizes the role of science in solving societal problems,” as well as a position “that exclusively considers standards and methods of the analytically-experimentally proceeding natural sciences as a criterion for scientificity” (ibid.). These two characteristics are also undoubtedly widespread among members of the “skeptical” movement. Since the “skeptical” movement in this way bears more resemblance to a worldview community than to a scientific community typical of today, the subject of religion must naturally also come into its focus.

Kurtz (1999: 27f.) has further explained concerning this problem area as follows:

The key question that I wish to address is: Should skeptical inquires question the regnant sacred cows of religion? There are both theoretical and prudential issues here at stake. I can find no theoretical reason why not, but there may be practical considerations. For one, it requires an extraordinary amount of courage today as in the past (especially in America!) to critique religion. ... The upshot of this controversy, in my judgement, is that scientific and skeptical inquirers should deal with religious claims. ... I do not believe, however, that CSICOP and the Skeptical Inquirer should in any way, except tangentially, deal with religious issues. But my reasons are pragmatic, not theoretical. It is simply a question of the division of labor.

This purely tactical division of labor turned out to be such that Kurtz set up a parallel organization called the Council for Secular Humanism (chairman: Paul Kurtz) as early as the 1970s, in parallel with CSICOP and its journal *Skeptical Inquirer*, with a Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion (CSR) and the journal *Free Inquiry* (editorial director: Paul Kurtz) as a counterpart to the Skeptical Inquirer. Massive criticism of religion was practiced there. CSICOP and the “Council for Secular Humanism” resided in one and the same building, had common offices, a common library, etc.; also the corresponding leading officials of both organizations were largely identical, the personnel overlap significant. In the end, one and the same persons and organizational structures only appeared under two different nameplates, depending on the occasion, for purely tactical considerations.

Significant changes have taken place over the past two decades, which I would like to outline in the following. In my opinion, the beginning was marked by a 1998 survey of *Skeptical Inquirer* subscribers conducted by Paul Kurtz, which revealed the following:

With regard to religious orientations, no less than 77.4% of *Skeptical Inquirer* readers consider themselves atheists, only 16% believe in God, and only 13% believe in life after death. These are values that deviate from the general population in quite an extreme way, especially in the USA. (According to the 1991 ISSP representative survey, only 7% of U.S. citizens consider themselves atheists or agnostics, while 70% believe in life after death). ... 75.5% of *Skeptical Inquirer* readers also believe that the *Skeptical Inquirer's* critique of the 'paranormal' should be extended to religious beliefs (Wunder, 2000: 15).

Apparently in the wake of these findings on the composition and desires of his own readership, Kurtz increasingly undermined the earlier tactical "labor division" with respect to religion in the subsequent years. The cooperation e.g. with the so-called "New Atheism" around Richard Dawkins and the foundation founded by him also became closer and closer. In the last years of his life, however, Kurtz lost control of this tendency, which he himself had initiated. After he handed over the business to a successor in 2008 at the age of 83 (his longtime lawyer Ronald Lindsay), bitter disputes arose within a few months because Lindsay, against Kurtz' will, now also adopted the aggressive rhetoric of the "New Atheists" for the "Center for Inquiry" (CFI, to which CSICOP had already been incorporated before under the new name CSI). In 2010, Kurtz therefore declared his resignation from CSI(COP), among others, and was effectively banned from the premises, having the keys to the facilities he founded taken away from him in protest. In 2016, CFI and the Richard Dawkins Foundation also merged institutionally. The internationally coordinating "skeptical" organization CSI(COP) no longer exists as an independent institution. Today it has only the status of a "program" within the "Center of Inquiry", which is clearly focused on ideological and political questions in the sense of the "New Atheism" of Richard Dawkins, today led by the journalist Robyn Blumner, who has also been the executive director of the Richard Dawkins Foundation since 2014. Thus, it is also institutionally clear: The "skeptical" movement is to be understood today much more clearly than 20 years ago as a subdivision of a quite predominantly ideologically-politically oriented atheistic current, with – compared to the style of Paul Kurtz, who died in 2012 – a comparatively high aggression and polemic potential. With regard to the GWUP as a branch of the international "skeptical" movement in German-speaking countries, little has changed institutionally, but also here, compared to the founding phase in the 1980s and 1990s, the connections and personal entanglements with the corresponding associations of organized atheism have become much closer and denser.

An even stronger – and now also increasingly open – ideological orientation is also accompanied, with a certain inevitability, by an expansion of the subject areas covered, for religious and ideological communities have an immanent tendency to a global claim to world interpretation (also e.g. in the fields of politics and ethics). Just to avoid possible misunderstandings: I have nothing against atheists nor against religious and ideological communities. But if there is a lack of restraint and insight into the fact that "critical thinking" can mean many things

depending on the context, that it rarely leads to intersubjectively compelling results and interpretations, and that no worldview can be gained without normative ingredients, then this is problematic. It leads far away from the everyday puzzle solving in science and carries the risk to wall oneself in a certain reality construction by already set normative or ontological premises. When dealing with anomalies, this is not a good entry requirement.

Anyone who has thoroughly read Karl Popper’s book *The Open Society and its Enemies* and understood his Robinson-Crusoe argument (Popper, 1945: 207) knows that the recipe for success of the social institution “science” was and is not “critical thinking” but mutual harsh criticism among dissenters. Therefore, the propagation of “critical thinking” is insufficient, because it by no means excludes self-affirming and immunizing circles of like-minded people. Only the unprotected admission of even uncomfortable criticism from others can protect against this.

(English translation by Gerhard Mayer and Stephan Matthiesen)

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