



Against bureaucrapitalism: a response to Shanley and colleagues

Christopher Coenen

To cite this article: Christopher Coenen (2022) Against bureaucrapitalism: a response to Shanley and colleagues, Journal of Responsible Innovation, 9:1, 143-146, DOI: [10.1080/23299460.2022.2055993](https://doi.org/10.1080/23299460.2022.2055993)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23299460.2022.2055993>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 31 Mar 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 328



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

Against bureaucrapitalism: a response to Shanley and colleagues

Christopher Coenen

Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (KIT), Karlsruhe, Germany

ABSTRACT

This is a response to an important contribution to the understanding and future of our research fields that deal with concepts and practices of responsible research and innovation (RRI). Comments are made on the bureaucrapitalist science system that Shanley and colleagues, the authors of this important contribution, hold up to scrutiny, on the relationship of RRI to the military use of science and technology, and on emancipatory perspectives in our research fields.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 16 March 2022
Accepted 16 March 2022

KEYWORDS

Bureaucracy; capitalism;
peace; RRI

I am very pleased to respond to an important contribution to the understanding of our research fields and their future, made by young colleagues of ours, which has taken on even greater significance in the terrible current situation.

Thanks

We have to thank the authors for asking the right questions at this historical moment, namely those about the meaning of our work and how we are equipped and deployed for it, and for having already found some answers to them in the form of political commitments.

Only recently, some moderate additions to their remarks would have been possible, but not strictly necessary; however, this has changed with the war in Ukraine. This is not to say, of course, that there had not already been needless misery, war crimes and irrational hatred before, within and across many other countries – such as Syria and Libya – not to mention the unbelievable, sometimes farcical scenes in the heartlands of liberal democracy. But against the background of the, in many respects, devastating pandemic (Coenen 2020) and the increasingly militaristic geopolitical rivalries already evident even in the rhetoric on new and emerging science and technology (see, e.g. Coenen et al. 2022), the fact that in the current war there have been barely concealed threats of nuclear strikes and nuclear armament is indeed a turning point, as the

CONTACT Christopher Coenen  christopher.coenen@kit.edu  Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (KIT), Karlsruhe, Germany

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

German chancellor Olaf Scholz called it, or, perhaps better said, one of the many significant catastrophic breaks in history.

Strengthening multi-generational ties

With the question of the meaning of our work in an epoch like ours, which I have also often been hearing from the oldest among us in recent years and increasingly so in the last months, the young colleagues have broken through certain routines of an academic discursive culture that are and have been shaped by us older generations, in the all too familiar bureaucrapitalist¹ framework dissected as discreetly as it is brilliantly in the article.

For in these times of turmoil, very different questions need to be asked than have been. Against this background, the task of RRI must be reexamined and the responsibilities of its community must be broadened. To begin with, the community of RRI scholars and practitioners would do well to include the very young and the very old more strongly in their discussions, not only to benefit from their collective energy and experience, but also to ensure that we continue to learn from the past even as we strive to take care of the future.

The limits of responsibility

Our inauthentic language, which was to some extent, and quite rightly so, directed against the jargon of authenticity criticised by Adorno (2002), is once again reaching its limits in the current situation. The history of the ‘short’ (Eric Hobsbawm) twentieth century serves as a masquerade in shameless wars of enrichment that are reminiscent of the late nineteenth century and at the same time huge and violent technical shows.

Given the centrality of the figure of science in so many of the tragedies in the making of the contemporary world – from failed climate policies, and the weakening of democracies, to all manner of high-tech and other warfare – one can rightly wonder whether responsibility is even possible. And yet, while the role of individual scientists and citizens alike in enabling or constraining these dangerous developments can be debated, we must not fail to question our own collective role as scientists in potentially contributing to the very conditions that helped make them possible.

Technoscience for peace?

Such collective responsibility recalls the notion of ‘science as communism’, but in a broader sense than Robert Merton (1973; orig. 1942) and perhaps even Bernal (1939) meant it. Here it would mean the complete rejection of the use of science for profit-oriented imperialist and nationalist wars, taking inspiration from Walter Benjamin’s timeless lament about the First World War in which ‘technology betrayed man and turned the bridal bed into a blood bath’ (Benjamin 2016; written 1923-1926, first published in 1928).

In seeking to develop both a critical and a practical capacity, RRI has been laudable not only in its aspirations but also in its transformative effects. However, these aspirations and effects are only possible by working in close proximity to technoscience. As

technologies are increasingly hyped for economic and military purposes, what are the limits of meaningful connection possibilities for the RRI community to technoscience, which continues to be increasingly subjected to military-industrial complexes? Can RRI play a role in steering it away from dual use and its application to destructive ends?

An emancipatory praxis

Some universities have, for example, a civil clause (German: *Zivilklausel*), that is, a self-commitment to engage exclusively in civilian (i.e. non-military) research, an idea that originated in Japan and is quite influential in Germany. And yet, this and other forms of science in the public interest can be incompatible with the bureaucrapitalist science system that the authors hold up to scrutiny. Since much of our time is spent, as the young colleagues write, ‘on putting together yet another grant application, for yet another project, for yet another call’ as well as on reporting and managing projects and all the other aspects of the ‘funding game,’ acting responsibly in these times requires challenging the precarious, project-based professional livelihoods of many of us.

The development of more solidarity among scientific workers and staff, including professors, would be an important step towards developing a more fundamental critique of the practices and goals of research and innovation from within. While this may seem like a distant ideal to some of us, most of us would probably agree that its pursuit is preferable to continually engaging in ‘cut-throat competition,’ as the authors call it.

As the authors write, ‘when bubbles burst, it helps to have allies,’ and they specifically mention open science, citizen science and the responsible technology movement. One could add and to some extent subsume here, alliances with the non-academic working classes and other marginalised social groups, which is in line with recent work on and in emancipatory technology studies (Frey, Schaupp, and Wenten 2021; Woodcock 2021). For RRI, this means in particular opening up public engagement activities, which are often limited to what in German is called *Bildungsbürgertum*, the educated (middle) classes (Humm, Schrögel, and Leßmöllmann 2020).

Beyond the bubble

Discussing discomfort is never easy, as the authors point out, and one can add here that it is especially not easy when it is a discomfort that we share with large parts of humanity but cannot express in our professional lives. Regarding the latter, to the extent that we systematically serve those forces that cause these discontents, so will we remain trapped by the fear of our civilisation’s imminent destruction. Being able to discuss this also means being able to discuss our own situation: the overload of bureaucratic work and the lack of meaningful contact and engagement with people outside the ‘bubble’.

We do indeed need to speak openly about ourselves, and I would like to thank the colleagues again for their frankness.

Note

1. The term ‘bureaucrapitalism’ (Coenen 2021) is a portmanteau composed of the words ‘bureaucracy’ and ‘capitalism’ and describes a new global regime that combines two vices

of the Cold War, each often attributed to one of the Cold War blocs, in an unprecedented way: a metastasising, uncontrolled bureaucracy that organises meaningless and destructive competition.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Christopher Coenen, political scientist, works in the strongly interdisciplinary field of technology assessment at KIT's Institute of Technology Assessment and Systems Analysis (ITAS), where he heads the research group 'Life, Innovation, Health and Technology' and has carried out projects for the European Commission, the German Federal Ministry of Research and the Bundestag, among others. He is the editor-in-chief of the journal 'NanoEthics: Studies of New and Emerging Technologies'.

References

- Adorno, T. W. 2002. *The Jargon of Authenticity*. London: Routledge.
- Benjamin, W. 2016. "To the Planetarium." In *One-Way Street*. Cambridge, London, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Bernal, J. D. 1939. *The Social Function of Science*. London: Routledge.
- Coenen, C. 2020. "In Times of Crisis." *NanoEthics* 14 (2): 123–128.
- Coenen, C. 2021. "Understanding Technology, Changing the World." *NanoEthics* 15 (2): 203–209.
- Coenen, C., A. Grinbaum, A. Grunwald, C. Milburn, and P. Vermaas. 2022. "Quantum Technologies and Society: Towards a Different Spin." *NanoEthics* 16. doi:10.1007/s11569-021-00409-4.
- Frey, P., S. Schaupp, and K.-A. Wenten. 2021. "Towards Emancipatory Technology Studies." *NanoEthics* 15 (1): 19–27.
- Humm, C., P. Schrögel, and A. Leßmöllmann. 2020. "Feeling Left Out: Underserved Audiences in Science Communication." *Media and Communication* 8 (1): 164–176.
- Merton, R. K. 1973. "The Normative Structure of Science." In *The Sociology of Science: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations*, 267–278. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Woodcock, J. 2021. "Towards a Digital Workerism: Workers' Inquiry, Methods, and Technologies." *NanoEthics* 15: 87–98.