

Threats to science jeopardize society, according to book

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Free inquiry is under serious threat in America, according to a new book by a Northwestern University historian of medicine and science.

"Galileo's Middle Finger: Heretics, Activists, and the Search for Justice in Science" (Penguin Press, on sale March 10, 2015), by Alice Dreger, investigates chillingly true stories of scientists attacked by activists who have found those scientists' work politically objectionable. She also shares her own harrowing experience at the hands of some of these activists.

"These threats to scientists ultimately amount to threats to democracy," said Dreger, a professor in medical humanities and bioethics at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. "Good activism requires good data—sustainable justice depends on knowing reality. In this way, these activists are ultimately undermining themselves."

A historian as well as a long-time activist for the rights of medical research subjects and patients, Dreger said these threats to scientists ultimately amount to a threat to social justice movements like the ones in which she has participated for 20 years. Dreger's work has focused on the rights of intersex people (people born with sex anatomies that don't fit standard definitions of male or female).

Dreger writes about the anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon, who was persecuted by activists within the American Anthropological Association, because they were convinced Chagnon's theories would

harm indigenous peoples; scientists Randy Thornhill and Craig Palmer, who presented evidence that rape might have an evolved sexual basis; and Charles Roselli, whose work on "gay sheep" led to his denouncement by gay and animal rights activists, including Martina Navratilova.

The project was motivated by a sudden twist in Dreger's own professional life. After years of working as a leader in the intersex rights movement—trying to stop unnecessary genital surgeries on babies born with differences of sex development—Dreger turned her attention to a controversy that involved transgender people.

She spent a year researching the case in which Northwestern researcher Michael Bailey was accused of mistreating transgender subjects. To her surprise, Dreger found the accusations to be politically motivated and unsupported. Her publication of the facts led to the accusers turning on her, quickly altering her professional reputation online.

As a consequence, Dreger set out on what became a five-year-long journey to understand the impact that these scientists-versus-activists wars over human identity are having on democracy. In her new book, she argues they are causing serious harm—and are being compounded by the economic collapse of investigative journalism caused by the Internet.

Returning to her own roots as an intersex advocate at the end of the book, Dreger shows how the collapse of investigative journalism and the general cultural failure to focus on evidence and [science](#) ultimately harms the most vulnerable. She shows that activism still matters – but that it has to be evidence-based to be truly just.

"In the end," Dreger said, "this is a rather harrowing tale of how I learned why academic freedom and academic responsibility are both critically necessary to the survival of democracy in America today. We should be very worried."

Provided by Northwestern University

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