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BOOK REVIEW

Audra Wolfe. *Freedom's Laboratory: The Cold War Struggle for the Soul of Science*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018. 312 pp.

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In *Freedom's Laboratory*, Audra Wolfe illuminates the political construction of long-advocated ideals such as the freedom, internationality, objectivity, and neutrality of science. She does so by studying the US cultural diplomatic activities and narratives related to science during the Cold War. With this analysis, she puts science back in the historical account of the Cold War US cultural offensive in the form of a psychological warfare, from which it had been mostly absent. Moreover, the book contributes to the study of the historical construction of the distinction between science and technology, and provides illuminating case studies to reflect on the relation between science and democracy and the historical intertwining of the rhetoric of both. Is science different under a democracy than under a dictatorship? Is there a “nature” of science that fosters one political regime over another? Would the values of a “free science” stimulate democracy whilst a controlled science would unfailingly lead to totalitarianism? Wolfe's historical actors, involved in the Cold War, debated about these questions and their answers shaped the narratives, scientific policies and diplomatic activities of their government,

as well as promoted (or cut short) personal careers and agendas. As Wolfe puts it, “for twenty years, leading US scientists and government officials alike attempted to convince audiences both at home and abroad that American science had uniquely transcended politics through its commitment to scientific freedom. This book is an attempt to understand why” (p. 2).

The explicit aim of Wolfe’s narrative is “to plant in readers’ minds a healthy skepticism about postwar US scientists’ claims of scientific autonomy, scientific freedom, and scientific internationalism” (p. 15). Wolfe explores the overt and covert governmental actions and funds devoted to proselytize this narrative. Her book shows how campaigns against Lysenkoism led by US scientists, as well as their debates on how to conduct these campaigns, shaped US science propaganda for two decades after the famous Lysenko affair. Soviet statements about how science under Communism was conducted on behalf of the needs of the people and was opposed to a “bourgeois science” concerned with knowledge for its own sake set the ground for the US ideological war against Communism. US propaganda praised “scientific freedom”, denounced meddling by the government in scientific matters, and advocated “basic” science. This whole rhetoric endorsed a view of science as an apolitical enterprise opposed to the socialist understanding of it as a social product that developed differently under Socialism than under Capitalism. On the other way round, spreading the values of “free science” was presented as a way to counter totalitarian regimes: those values could only lead to democracy.

In contradiction to the US efforts to depict science as apolitical, Wolfe demonstrates the links between the scientists involved in building, promoting and disseminating this rhetoric and US policy-making and intelligence agencies such as the Department of State, the US Information Agency and the CIA. She reveals how since the 1950s the US government boosted the advocacy of scientific internationalism due to the fact that scientists’ contacts abroad and free scientific exchange were seen as a potential way to covertly collect scientific intelligence. This is why some US scientists could stand up for scientific freedom in an era of suspicion. Advocating scientific freedom was not oppositional at all. Wolfe points out that the anti-Communist propaganda held by scientists was mainly an individual initiative that matched the US government agenda. However, she also puts a large amount of evidence in front of the reader’s eyes about the covert ways in which governmental agencies paid some private entities to support such propagandistic claims as well as evidence of the tremendous amount of links between individual scientists and state posts and funds.

This is actually one of the most important contributions of this book. Federal governmental agencies followed a policy of indirectly funding those advocating for the vision of science they wanted to enhance (such as private scientists, historians of science, scientific associations, science education programs reformers) through nominally private organizations. This sustained strategy made it particularly difficult for the historian to see the “hidden hand of government” (p. 112) in such activities. As Wolfe puts it, this fact has “obscured the existence

of cultural diplomacy in science for most of the past fifty years” (p. 112). Drawing on an outstanding archival work, she provides new accounts of two areas in which this has been especially the case: nuclear disarmament and international science education. With science as cultural diplomacy in the focus of her analysis of the sources, Wolfe unfolds the previously untold history of the Asia Foundation’s role in the US Cold War psychological warfare.

Throughout the book, Wolfe judiciously documents the contradictions between the ideal of science advanced by US propaganda both at home and abroad and the realities of the domestic science policies regarding the rejection of traveling visas, defense advising, covert personal chasing, and intelligence gathering. Many restrictions that were associated to Communism and publicly denounced by US propaganda as a “cancer” (p. 30) that needed to be removed in order to construct the hegemony of the so-called “Free world” were also happening inside the US borders. Open channels, a requisite for the good health of science according to their narrative, so appealing to US foreign policymakers for intelligence gathering, were in turn hindered by security advisors, which saw them as holes through which Communism could percolate and US secrets leak. This book presents how these contradictions were an intrinsic part, from the very beginning, of the efforts to integrate science into US foreign policy.

Wolfe acknowledges that the first programs for US psychological warfare barely discussed science explicitly, but she presents evidence that, from the late 1940s, the US foreign policy establishment endorsed a particular way of thinking about scientific freedom as essential to winning the global Cold War. Wolfe’s archival work shows how the launch of Sputnik in 1957 prompted the explicit inclusion of science in the US psychological warfare documents and triggered a change of narrative. After Sputnik, the US propaganda cultivated the difference between science and technology by presenting the latter as a way to advance nationalistic goals, whilst portraying science as being, by definition, international and cooperative. The previous focus on the advancement of science (including technology) as a natural fruit (and measure) of the democratic values of a country changed into a narrative that judged the democratic nature of a society by its efforts to foster the freedom of science universally. By championing this cause, the United States aimed at obtaining the favor of the public opinion in the battle against the Communist block after Sputnik. Technical achievements had now to be read in a nationalistic, selfish key. In contrast, favoring scientific freedom was presented as an “altruistic” cause, for the sake of knowledge. Wolfe’s work highlights how the case for the distinction between science and technology adopted a deep political relevance in the Cold War psychological propaganda strategy.

Freedom’s Laboratory unveils the links between the construction of the rhetoric of freedom in science and the US Cold War strategy to win what was built as a war between “civilizations”. By answering the question of what was at stake in US propaganda appeals to scientific objectivity and freedom, this book highlights how scientific political neutrality became a key value of US

cultural diplomacy throughout most of the Cold War. Wolfe's work, which provides a new look at the role of science in US cultural diplomacy through new archival documents and an outstanding analytical work, constitutes an essential contribution to Cold War studies, and especially to the emerging field of the history of science diplomacy.