

The following is the text read by Pat Herbst at the PME 46 conference in Haifa, Israel, on July 20, 2023, as his intervention in the Oxford-style debate among journal editors. The debaters considered the proposal “A manuscript's relationship to global sustainability should be a criterion in determining its acceptance for a mathematics education journal.” Herbst was the second speaker who spoke against the proposal (Gabriele Kaiser articulated the first position against; David Wagner and Despina Potari articulated the two positions for the proposal)

The proposal under discussion is “A manuscript's relationship to global sustainability **should be a criterion in determining its acceptance** for a mathematics education journal.” The proposal is not that mathematics education research journals should **welcome**, or perhaps even **encourage**, research pieces that overtly address the Sustainable Development Goals. The proposal rather is that mathematics education research journals should **require** acceptable publications to indicate whether and how it is that they do so. To that proposal, I am very comfortable arguing against, not only as part of this exercise, but also more publicly, as the editor of the Journal for Research in Mathematics Education. Indeed, JRME, as an international journal, aims to be the standard bearer for excellence in research of wide interest to our field and it cannot be a single issue journal. As a stakeholder of our field myself, I also think that the proposal to narrow our research to only that which addresses sustainable development goals is dangerous. The proposal smacks of the kind of illiberal thought that is rampant in the world these days and that, despite the benign nature of its sources and the good purposes it aims to accomplish, comes with an ideological force that threatens the viability of the institutions that cultivate public knowledge.

Perhaps there is room for a new journal dedicated to publish mathematics education research that addresses sustainable development, perhaps there is room for mathematics education research papers in journals of research on sustainability. Certainly, there is room for articles that address sustainability in our field's mainstream research journals, and as a novel topic we might even say encouragement, as long as they are also excellent pieces of scholarship in mathematics education. But we should not narrow the scope of research our main journals publish to only those pieces and we should not expect every article to relate to the global sustainability agenda. Or to any other political or policy issue, global, national, or local. In saying this I am quite explicitly assuming that our journals are not journals of policy or practice in mathematics education, but journals of research on mathematics education, where researchers write research and are for the most part contributing to our knowledge base in order to enable this knowledge to grow. As such, our fields' journals need to publish the best research our field is doing and not be circumscribed to reporting research on any one particular policy or practice.

Let me say that I am not disagreeing with the UN document. I personally subscribe to the goals it aspires. And I also appreciate that, within its lofty rhetoric and globalist ideology, the declaration acknowledges the right each nation has to self determination in regard to whether and how it works towards those goals. And, indeed, the rhetoric used shows how much the U.N. is part of the **political apparatus**. Politics, particularly the politics of an organism like the UN, which aspires at the problematic role of world government, necessarily operates with

compromises and consensus which it tries to present as consistent and principled ideas. It does so, perhaps with good intentions but also largely to sustain itself as an ideological apparatus of state (in this case the quite alive ideology of world government). In contrast, Liberal scholarship, liberal science is unbounded in its scope and grows out of its contributors' individual capacity to exercise rational dissent in a context where diversity of thought is seen as an asset. This includes the capacity to rationally dissent with the terms of engagement proposed by any political agency, be that institutional, local, national, or global. I use the word liberal to mean neither profligate nor neo-liberal, but in reference to the freedom of thought and expression that have begotten our scientific communities. Classical liberalism that is, of John Stuart Mill's veneer.

Liberal scholarship avails itself of the right to poke holes in the presumed consistency of any political or policy document as well as the right to choose not to give to political documents and agendas the time of day if it doesn't suit liberal science's penchant for the development of knowledge. Regardless of how valuable we may consider, individually or collectively, the sustainability agenda, we would be self-inflicting a lethal wound if we curtailed the possibility to publish for those who bring other concerns to our midst or those who have reasoned positions against a sustainability agenda. Indeed, a big share of our research output should be concerned with basic research, with contributing to our understanding of our objects of study and the development of our particular gaze. We would be damaging our field if this basic research became unpublishable for not having practical applications to sustainable development. The history of science is replete with examples of individuals whose scholarship countered the political consensus of their times and who provided, nevertheless, contributions that endure in science, sometimes enduring much longer than the politics they subscribed to or opposed. And there is no reason to think that our world politics has reached any absolute moral clarity; no reason even to think that our generation is any better than previous ones; no reason whatsoever to avail ourselves of the authority to call the liberal science game over. What a nerve! The time to stop liberal science and dedicate scholarly efforts to social engineering has not yet come; it will not come. We must protect liberal science, particularly in these times of extreme ideologies from the left and the right, we need to ensure that science and scholarship continue to be liberal— that is, open to a diversity of individual contributions from any and all ideological sources while, as a whole, staying uncommitted to any ideology. Individually, we include conservatives and progressives, pacifists and militarists, capitalists and socialists, vegetarians and paleo-eaters; but the field is neither conservative nor progressive, neither nationalist nor globalist, neither neither reactionary nor revolutionary. It is our collective responsibility to keep it liberal. I made this argument in much more detail in my July editorial (which is open access this month), i encourage you to read it.

As a key element of our research commons, JRME is and will continue to be committed to its mission—to promote research on the teaching and learning of mathematics and to be a site for publishing the best scholarship our field produces. In a recent research commentary Nicole Louie and Wan-Yue Zhan noted that our research has not always explicitly interrogated the ends of mathematics education. I agree. I hear that comment as suggesting, for example, that

our research should not be expected to adopt uncritically the ends stipulated by reform documents (not even if our own publisher, NCTM, endorses them).

Indeed, in order to enable a liberal interrogation of the ends of mathematics education it is all the more important we should not expect of all our contributions to toe any party line, regardless of whether it comes from NCTM, the US Government, or the United Nations. To adopt the ends of any of those policy or political organizations would be tantamount to actually stopping the liberal scholarly discussion and just engaging in institutional research.

We are living in a moment in which all scholarly fields are expected to be outwardly oriented. Our universities ask us to produce marketable Intellectual Property and public scholarship, the media wants soundbites that will agitate one or another of the multiple sides in dispute. In that context, it seems important that the institutions that we can control (our journals and professional associations) not bend in the direction of those winds, but stay firm in our mission to produce knowledge that empowers us to produce more knowledge. Long ago Shulman quoted Robert Solow in saying that the fact that there is no such thing as a perfect anti-sepsis does not mean that one might as well do brain surgery in a sewer. Everything we do is indeed political in some regard, but this does not mean we should voluntarily turn our research institutions into political agencies.