Sometimes you need a pariah

Would someone as contrary and controversial as psychologist Hans Eysenck survive in academia today? Philip Corr doesn’t think so – and believes that science will suffer as a result.
last month’s headline-grabbing postpone-ment by the London School of Economics and a talk by a former doctoral student of mine on account of “negative social media activity” raises concerns about whether controversial views are given a fair hearing in the modern academy.

As reported by Times Higher Education, Adam Perkins, lecturer in the neurobiology of personality at King’s College London’s Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neurosc-ience (IoPPN), had been due to expand on his research indicating that welfare dependency creates, over the generations, “employment-resistant personalities”. However, his talk was cancelled at the last minute amid fears that it might be disputed by protesters.

I couldn’t help but reflect on what the social media activity might have been ahead of a talk on IQ, race, religion or sex by another IoPPN researcher, with whom I once shared a desk for three months: Hans Eysenck. Some indication is given by the fact that Eysenck – who was born 100 years ago this month, and died in 1997 – was physically attacked at the LSE in 1973 on account of his view that the documented statistical mean difference in IQ between “black” and “white” populations is partly genetic in nature – as well as his belief that innate differences in IQ are largely responsible for social class stratification.

Such claims – which remain hotly contested to this day – were far more incendiary than those of Perkins, and, indeed, other attempts were made to mute them. Arriving to lecture at the University of Birmingham, also in the early 1970s, Eysenck was greeted with the phrase “Fascist Eysenck has no right to speak!” daubed on the wall.

However, alongside it was the contradictory phrase: “Uphold genuine academic freedom!”

And the fact is that despite holding an array of highly controversial positions, Eysenck flour-ished as an academic and also as a public figure. It is well worth asking whether he still did cut little ice.

No doubt modern selection, promotion and funding panels would also look down on some of his choices of publication outlets, which included such distinctly middle-brow venues as Reader’s Digest and even the top-shelf maga-zine Penthouse, a 1970 edition of which included an insightful interview with Eysenck by the British psychologist David Cohen next to a risqué picture of a naked model called Pretty Polly.

Nor would Eysenck’s cause be helped in the modern academy by the manner of his approach. Although he was an old-school gentleman in person, he could be abrasive and combative in print. He felt the need to win the argument, and sometimes he used theatrical tricks to do so. During public lectures, for instance, he would deliberately leave holes in his argument; when critics jumped on them he would come back with a killer retort. The child of a famous screen actress and a cabaret raconteur who was brought up in Berlin by his opera-singing maternal grandmother, Eysenck was a performer, and despite evincing denial, he loved it. His 1990 autobiography, Rebel with a Cause, asserts that “a lecturer need not become less intellectual and scientific for also being entertaining”. And it glorifies reports of the verdict of an American psychologist who had observed a talk of his in 1964: “I strongly urge any critic of Eysenck’s work to contin-

Newton and Darwin had difficult personalities, and there is good reason to think that this is necessary given the opposition advocates of new ideas face.

F ew academics enjoy being humiliated by a colleague, and the modern obligation to regularly publish and land external grants would give victims of such treatment ample opportunity to exact revenge when asked to referee one of the perpetrator’s applications. Even in Eysenck’s day, it was a regular occurrence at the Institute of Psychiatry (as the IoPPN was then known) for colleagues to march to the office of奥迪 Lewis, his dean, to demand his dismissal – or, at the very least, some attempt to mute his outspoken views. Things got so bad that Eysenck threatened to expose to the national press his colleagues’ attempts to stifle the new psychological treat-ments he advocated, and he made plans to establish a rival Institute of Behaviour Ther-apy. One can only imagine how the reputa-

Many of us now agree that Eysenck was right to denounce the unscientific nature of psychoanalysis as it was practised during his younger days.

Indeed, in an important sense, Eysenck’s ability to inspire subsequent generations of researchers derives just as much from how he fearlessly and defiantly pursued his ideas as from his ideas themselves. One can imagine that the likes of Adam Perkins still feel this inspiration. But, at the same time, just imagine the Twitter storm – and the institutional behemoths it would provoke – that would be generat-ed by an Eysenck talk today. In all likelihood, the man who was described in his Guardian obituary as the “people’s psycholo-gist” would have been not so much “gratified gratas persona absinta” even if he had managed to secure an academic position in the first place, he certainly wouldn’t have landed a chair. That would have saved a few feathers from being ruffled, but it would really have been in the long-term interests of science!