

Academic freedom? Old myths in a changed world.
Andrea Saltelli, ESOF July 15 2022 at 18.15, in Leiden's
Stadsgehoorzaal, Session "Academic Freedom under Pressure"

*It is inappropriate to be concerned
about mice when there are tigers abroad*
George E. P. Box, (1976)¹

The theme of the session presents as possible threats to academic freedom

- Political and economic pressures
- Authoritarian regimes & radical social groups that try to censor lecturers
- Ostracism for supporting politically incorrect views
- Private interests highjack academe as 'Merchant of Doubt' (Oreskes & Conway, 2011)
- Public or private funding availability discouraging researchers to pursue non-mainstream topics

Also part of this narrative is foreign interference¹.

I offer here a different reading, which situates the challenge inside, more than outside, the world of academia²:

The predicaments of academic freedom are both

- Part of broader mutated social circumstance: a new world, different from that of both Max Weber 1917 and Theodor Adorno 1944, mostly in that the notion of a shared reality appears challenged by increased polarization^{3,4}.
- To some extent internal to academia itself with its orientation to become a global market for education (of notice the case of UK^{5,6}), and mired in internal tensions among families of Wissenschaft⁷.

The broader movements are

- The neoliberal revolution from the 80's, with its new public management (also affecting academia with a revolution in its governance)
- The revolution engendered by the new media (Francis' rapidification⁸ – a technology driven acceleration of change)
- The crisis of science (or better of Wissenschaft), with its dimensions (methodological, existential, ethical, metaphysical...^{9,10}); the end of a master narrative¹¹, the end of a monopoly system³
- The change in the figure of the public intellectual¹²

The mutated role of academia sees institutes of higher education pursuing – with encouragement from international rankings - the 'implausible dream'¹³ of a global market – universities becoming a 'business'. This has among its effects¹³:

- The neglect of university's three key missions (cultivating democratic citizenship, fostering critical thinking and protecting academic freedom)
- Increased inequality, with higher costs for students and their family

¹ European Research Area Policy Agenda, section 'Deepening the ERA through protecting academic freedom in Europe'. For a critique of ERA see

https://www.uib.no/sites/w3.uib.no/files/attachments/histera_final_report_25_2_0.pdf

² This refers the so-called developed world, not to academia in dictatorial regimes.²

- The commodification and medialization of research and researchers
- The change of the balance of power between academic staff and administrators
- The proletarianization of academic labour research force¹⁴

One part of academia participates in strategies of regulatory capture where science/Wissenschaft becomes ‘the currency of lobbies’^{15,16}. Science becomes something that vested interests portend to defend (Guardians of Reason in defence of enlightenment values¹⁷).

If this reading is correct, then appeals to restore academic freedom without a change in these drivers becomes unfeasible and unviable, and perhaps undesirable to the eyes of those directly interested, trapped in the existing logic.

Tracing a path ahead in the present “rapidified”, “fragmented-truth” landscape may appear unrealistic. Yet some *via negativa*¹⁸ prescriptions [looking at the don’ts instead of the do’s] may be of use: do not aggravate the problem by fostering narratives of efficiency and excellence. It would help contrasting the application of New Public Management methods and logic to institutes of higher education. Discourage standardization (international rankings), adopt a user perspective (students and their families and map areas of exclusion/invisibility. Foster the local, the creative, the diversity). Oppose logic of innovation as equivalent to “information economy for all” (OECD-PISA¹⁹). Reverse system of perverse incentives²⁰ e.g. in evaluation. Contrast austerity policies applied to HE. Contrast narratives of efficiency and excellence with narratives of fairness and diversity. Contrast autistic [a reference to Post-autistic economics²¹] tendency in academia⁷ by fostering multi- cross- and inter-disciplinarity, e.g. via selective funding of journals. Monitor instances of “policy based evidence” and regulatory capture. Monitor the implications for democratic agency of the “numerification” of the real^{22,23}.

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