
COLLOQUIA

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Academic freedom and the ethical value of thinking

Summary

The purpose of this article is to analyse the changes in the conditions of academic freedom that occurred over the last several decades and to point out the possible ramifications of those changes. Firstly, the author begins by depicting the origins and the meaning of the neohumanistic modern idea of academic freedom and with outlining some of its paradoxes and limitations. Secondly, the classical neohumanistic concept of academic freedom is juxtaposed with new premises of economic neoliberalism, as diagnosed by Michel Foucault. Also the consequences of economic legitimisation of political order for academic freedom are drawn. Ultimately, the author concentrates on the results of economic limitations of freedom for free thinking and its relationship with human moral judgements.

Key words: academic freedom, liberalism, neoliberalism, economy, thinking, university, moral judgement

***Bildung* as a plea for academic freedom**

The German idea of *Bildung* (roughly and mostly inadequately rendered into English as “education”) is rightly considered to have been influential on the background of modern constitutions of not only German, but also Central and West-European universities. Although modern universities nowadays function in a mode that is far from the original 19th century concept, the idea of *Bildung*, while not untouched through the social, historical and technological development of the last 200 years, is still alive as a measure of change, or as an ideal we have departed from. The departure of our universities from their origins is

both praised and decried, but the mere fact that it is being constantly described and evaluated confirms that the concept itself is far from being a pure historical phenomenon (See e.g. Ash 1999; Wagner 1995).

What makes the idea of *Bildung* still powerful in our contemporary academic debate? Originally, *Bildung* was a set of ideas that referred to the late 18th century neohumanistic conception of individual development (self-formation). Launched by Johann Wolfgang Goethe and Johann Gottfried Herder, it found its completion when it was developed by Wilhelm von Humboldt. In Humboldt, the individual idea of *Bildung* was based on a maximal political freedom and consisted of two principles: freedom and individualism, combined in a formula of full and proportional development of one's powers, independent of any external measures or set ideals. Thus, *Bildung* is never education towards an ideal, like in traditional forms, it is rather self-formation as an individual image of humanity (*Bild-ung*). It has nothing to do with the Platonic teleological structure of *paideia* towards a transcendent idea of humanity (see Humboldt 1960).

Nevertheless, the idea of *Bildung* gained its historical impact not so much as a liberal educational concept rooted in the humanism of the Enlightenment, but rather as a basis for the Prussian reform of the education system after the defeat by Napoleon in 1807. Wilhelm von Humboldt as the secretary of education (1809–1810) was responsible for establishing a completely new system that was to reinforce national powers after the political humiliation. The new structure of the school system with the new university at its top reflected the premises of neohumanistic *Bildung*.

Up to the 18th century, universities were based on the scholastic doctrine. Their task lay rather in the development of the doctrine than in the support of an avant-garde method of new science. The universities were not research institutions – this role was fulfilled by royal academies – but vocationally educated future physicians, lawyers and priests. During the Enlightenment, the role of scholasticism as the overwhelming academic doctrine faded away. But the Enlightenment's schooling, also on the academic level, was based on utilitarianism and specialisation. Its task was mostly to deliver amenable civil servants. There existed a few excellent scientific centres (e.g. Halle, Göttingen, Jena), but the tendencies of the time were to change them into more practical and vocational learning institutions.

On the one hand, the reform challenged the educational utilitarianism of the Enlightenment, but on the other, it undermined the former scholastic education, limited by the doctrine of the Catholic Church. The fundament of *Bildung* is the absolute priority of general education against specialisation and

vocational training. In Humboldt's idea of university (manifested in 1809 by establishing the University of Berlin), the premises of freedom and individuality were combined with the idealistic concept of pure science. Humboldt's idea of science was opposite to doctrine. Science is an open phenomenon that can never be fully discovered or completed. That is why the heart of the new university was research. The free development of internal powers (the basic principle of *Bildung*) requires the freedom of teaching and research. The unity of teaching and research (as opposed to traditional learning) combined with freedom and individuality of personal development composed the multifaceted idea of academic freedom and autonomy (see Humboldt 1964: 255–256).

The idea of *Bildung* and its realisation in the modern university was a promise of multidimensional freedom and independence: apart from the individual freedom of learning and teaching, the new university was based on autonomy from at least three interrelated powers: the Church (or churches), the State, and the Economy. Freedom of research and the unity of learning and researching (theoretically at least) insulated the university from doctrine as well as from political power relations and economic pressure.

The historical realisation of these independences was limited: firstly, the *Bildung* ideal became a new criterion of social advancement and weakened the emancipatory impact of neohumanism; secondly, the conservative political reaction after 1815 and above all the year 1848 undermined the political freedom of the university. Last but not least the specialisation of sciences in the second half of the 19th century limited the freedom of research and free “living in ideas”.

Although the state was obliged to subsidise universities (economic freedom), it had no right to interfere in their functioning (political independence). In fact, state and church never abandoned the idea of influence and regained it in more conservative periods. Apart from that, the reformers (in fact, the reform was based not only on Humboldt's ideas, but was also shaped by Fichte, Schelling and Schleiermacher) presumed the unity of goals between the state and the university, a kind of reconciliation between them, which at the same time meant the limitation of liberal ideas of the Enlightenment. While Schelling projected a structural analogy between the university and the state, Fichte warned against overextended academic freedom. Even the most liberal Humboldt wrote about the common goals of the university and the state: the former tension between individual freedom and power of the state disappeared (see Anrich 1995).

Thus, in the Humboldtian idea of university there is inadvertently inscribed a dependence on a state organisation. As a result, academic freedom and state goals have always been in tension.

Academic freedom in neoliberalism

The relationship between the university and the three external powers has changed over the last century. The conflict between them became less tangible and more intrusive at the same time. In order to depict this conflict I am going to refer to Foucauldian analyses of disciplinary power of economy.

In his widely known works on disciplinary power (e.g. *Discipline and Punish, The History of Sexuality*), Michel Foucault develops the genealogy of ways in which the liberal art of government requires the procedures of control that counterbalances the awarded liberties. In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, he focuses the analysis of disciplinary techniques and biopolitical mechanisms on the economy. Economy is a phenomenon (like psychiatry, medicine or criminology) that takes part in the so-called 'regime of truth' (which means: its internal logic determines what is true or not in a certain context). Since the classical liberalism of the 18th century, economic discourse has competed with the juridical or historical discourses for a role in the political sphere and government. According to Foucault, economic freedom and the issues of safety (functioning by the means of disciplinary techniques) are strictly interrelated (See Foucault 2008: 67).

In the series of lectures of 1979, Foucault describes changes in the relationship between politics and the economy in Europe's most recent history. After 1948 (Germany) there was a neoliberal reaction against interventionism or Keynesianism. One of Ludwig Erhard's (the later chancellor of West Germany) statements is significant in this context: *Only a state that establishes both the freedom and responsibility of citizens can legitimately speak in the name of the people* (*Ibidem*: 81). The marketplace has to be freed from state regulations, otherwise the state does not represent the people. The meaning of this statement is not only the banal fact that the state that exceeds its power in economic order violates some primary rights. There's more to it than that: the economy, development and growth **produce** sovereignty and political legitimacy. The economy produces sovereign political power that supports the economy, i.e. the economy bestows the state with legitimacy that, in turn, becomes a guarantee for the economy. In other words: the economy becomes a source of public law (see *ibidem*: 84). Although the economy and the state stay in a relationship of mutual legitimisation, it is the economy that is primary, not the state. The economy produces political symbols that enable mechanisms of power and legitimises them. In this way economic growth takes over the role of history for state foundation and legitimisation.

Thus, while the problem of classical liberalism was how to limit state power and create space for economic freedom, the problem of neoliberalism was how to **create** a state, which does not exist yet, out of economic space that has no state-character (see *ibidem*: 86–87). Neoliberalism is not based on laissez-faire, but on state intervention, intervention not in the market place, but in society. The state (social policy) is not so much oriented towards softening the anti-social result of a free market, but on excluding anti-competitive mechanisms that society can produce (see *ibidem*: 160).

Although Foucault analyzes these processes on the example of post-war Germany, I believe the analysis can be applied to the situation of Poland and other central- or Eastern European countries after 1989. The ideological or historical legitimisation of these republics was extinguished and the new states were (more or less) founded on an economic, neoliberal basis. The state regained its foundation in economic freedom. This means, that although neoliberalism is rather a universal phenomenon (in Western Europe and the United States dominant since the early 1980s), in post-soviet Eastern Europe, like earlier in post-war Germany, it became the only source of state legitimisation and powerfully influenced the public law. This is at least one of the reasons why the neoliberal change in this area was more radical and forceful than elsewhere.

If we apply Foucault's analysis we find that two or three instances that used to endanger academic freedom in the Humboldtian model of university, in neoliberal era amalgamated in one Economy-State(-Church). Two or three sources of pressure which mitigated themselves, became one overwhelming power in a non-obvious, but nonetheless dominant way. The university, formerly legitimised by the state, is now legitimised by the state that is legitimised by the market place which in its turn is ensured and regulated by the state. This means that the economy as a regime of truth excludes discussion on its own premises. This logic claims the status of an axiom that we take for granted. It is evident in the public media discourse about higher education (talking about the market purpose of education as well as cooperation with business or the belief that students and teachers are "human resources", human capital and educational investments, etc.). This means that the matrix of economic reason spreads over realms that by nature (or, if we do not like 'nature' here, by history) cannot be reduced to the exchange market (science, art, philosophy). As a result, economic reason is identified with rationality itself.

Subsequently, the legitimate liberal state has to demand from universities subordination to the market place and that they become enterprises or corporations. This demand is sanctioned with complicated bureaucratic machinery.

I will not analyse in detail the multiple ways it compromises academic freedom since the arguments are widely known from academic debate. It is enough to note that free thinking is having a hard time – not because it is politically subversive in a traditional way but because it is subversive against one overwhelming State-Economy power. Higher education subdued to the marketplace produces a kind of soft and non-obvious censorship: theoretically one has the right to write and say what one pleases but the machine makes sure that statements that fit in the dominant rationality are acknowledged (financed) (e.g. through grant system, syllabuses, learning outcomes charts, and so on). Under pressure, the representatives of academia accept (in Poland very keenly, in fact) the new entrepreneurial language of self description (vice-rector for “human resources” at Warsaw University, students as clients, etc.).

Our crisis

Why do some academics resent this state of affairs so much? Why is this state of affairs dangerous? The critics of the reform of academic education point out rightly that the demise of higher education in the sense of *Bildung* leads to a crisis of culture, the erosion of language, a disappearance of the intellectual elite, finally, with functional illiteracy and neobarbarism.

What I would like to point out is another aspect strictly related to the very issue of thinking. I need to make two assumptions: (1) thinking, if understood specifically (not as reasoning or calculating), has something to do with our ability to make moral considerations and moral choices; (2) the university naturally seems to be a section of public space where the conditions of thinking are secure (academic freedom).

(1) In our tradition of thought there were philosophers who did not consider thinking as pure cognitive power, but associated the ability to think with the ability to make right moral choices. I will concentrate on three examples.

It was Socrates first who believed that the ability of internal dialogue can prevent us from doing deeds that would introduce discord into our souls. As a famous statement from *Gorgias* goes: “It’s better to have my lyre or a chorus that I might lead out of tune and dissonant, and have the vast majority of men disagree with me and contradict me, than to be out of harmony with myself, to contradict myself, though I’m only one person” (Plato 1997, *Gorgias* 482c). The internal dialogue splits the monolithic identity of the self and enables

reflection. To reach this state one has to withdraw from the world. Only when I am with myself, in solitude, can I become my own interlocutor. This, of course, is not enough to explain the role of thinking in moral matters: the stake of this internal dialogue is inner consistency of the self. Since I am the only person I cannot escape from, it is better for me to fall out with everybody else than myself.

Socrates also believed that this internal dialogue can be externalized and that it is worthwhile to discuss with fellow citizens concepts such as justice, friendship or piety, and let them find out whether they really understand what they are talking about when they use them. It was not knowledge that was at stake here, but indeed – thinking. Socrates, in the early Plato's dialogues never concludes with a solution of the problem or the definition of the concept discussed. It is thinking itself that awakens us and makes us conscious and that insulates us against committing evil we would avoid had we time to think things over. So, it is thinking and dialogue itself that makes us better people even if the tangible result is lacking. Thinking is like wind that airs our mental habits and sets them in motion. The problem with thinking is that once we start, we always have to continue, no settled goal is to be reached. Otherwise the conventionalism we overcome is likely to become nihilism. So, the danger of thinking lies not in the destructive power of thought but in the desire to reach results that free us from strenuous mental activity. The difficulty of Socrates' path lies in the necessity to start again and again.

Kant bestowed the principle of inner consistency of the self with the transcendental dimension. The categorical imperative could be considered as a modern version of Socrates' intuition. If before doing something I forget to stop and think whether I as a person bestowed with free will would want the principle of my action to become common law, I risk inconsistency in myself, that means discrepancy between me as an empirical creature and me as a goal in itself.

But Kant's contribution to the problem of the relationship between thinking and morality is not limited to the realm of practical reason. Just as Socrates held dialogues with people in the Agora, Kant wanted to get through to the community of interested readers. "Enlarged mentality" is a specifically Kantian phenomenon, related both to the power of judgement and to critical thinking, or public use of reason. The public use of reason is juxtaposed with the private use of reason. The private use of reason is bound with private places in the world (e.g. public duty, position) and therefore is limited by the fact. The public use of reason requires that the human being "enjoys unlimited freedom to use

his own reason and speak in his own person” (Kant 1963: 6). Thus, public use of reason is “the use which a person makes of it as a scholar before a reading public” (*Ibidem*: 5). The basic premise of the public use of reason and of critical thinking is freedom in a double aspect. Firstly, it is the political freedom of speech and publishing. Secondly, it is sort of mental freedom (imagination) to detach ourselves from our private place in the world (duty, interest) which is a precondition of power of judgement of things from the common, public perspective (a precondition of critical thinking). This ability of assuming the perspective of others has ethical salience – if I free myself from my private perspective I will not be ready to accept political or juridical (administrative) solutions that are unjust, e.g. harmful for a certain type of minority.

Hannah Arendt referred to both Kant and Socrates when she considered the link between thinking and morality (or, at least, decency) (see Arendt 2003: 159–192; Arendt 1992: 40–46). Both the capacity of internal dialogue and the enlarged mentality proved their utmost importance in the crises of our times. Her paradigmatic diagnosis of Eichmann’s inability to think was, in fact, composed of these two inability. The famous “banality of evil” was both the inability of internal dialogue (Eichmann never really reflected on what he had done – his hierarchical and administratively guaranteed identity protected him from the internal split in the self; had he been prone to such a conflict, the acquisition of organisational rules would have been hampered. The complete unity of his person guaranteed the smoothness in his mortal administrative action) and atrophy of public use of reason and, consequently, the power of critical thinking (Eichmann was unable to put himself in another’s position) (see Arendt 2006: 21–36). However paradoxically it may sound, the internal harmony of the self and the external harmony with the fictional world produced an excellent cog in the Nazi power machinery¹.

(2) If we acknowledge the argument that thinking under certain conditions can prevent us from committing evil, thinking gains enormous educational import. The pedagogic situation of thinking is paradoxical: if thinking is so important, we expect that experts (whoever they are) answer the pragmatic question: how do we make people think, how do we educate towards thinking. On the other hand, the elusive nature of thinking (in the presumed meaning) makes it unsuitable as a fixed teaching goal. The programs of

¹ This affinity between mental powers and morality explains why Arendt couldn’t rely on the Heideggerian concept of poetic thinking of being, but had to draw upon thinkers in whom thinking had something to do with human affairs and interpersonal relationships.

teaching thinking always run the risk of making thinking a more or less technical issue. Thinking does not fit in “learning outcomes”, neither can it be directed “in the classroom”. Can we at the same time avoid subduing thinking under technical didactic rules and still support it somehow? We probably are not able to “teach” thinking in a positive sense. What we can do is to create and secure conditions under which thinking *could* thrive.

If we consider the public spaces that are designed to be spaces of free thought, universities notwithstanding (and apart from the crisis) still seem to be the natural choice. Even if we cannot simply teach people how to think, it does not mean at the same time that we are helpless in the matter. What we can do is to secure the conditions of thinking. We can show, for instance, why non-thinking is dangerous. We can, further, through analyses and interpretation of the texts of tradition, learn different perspectives of the world. We can also through philosophy or history try to understand the genesis of the modern world and fathom its premises. We can introduce to students the representatives from the past that are worthy of having a dialogue with. This is not thinking yet, but this is a good atmosphere for internal dialogue and critical thinking. The problem of our times is that these activities, although they seem to be natural for universities, become more and more marginalised or gain the features of underground subversive combat (see also Giroux 2013: 19–43). The elusiveness of thinking is not likely to provide it many advocates in the current academic debate. The problem is that neither the highest quality of humanistic education nor belonging to the intellectual elite guarantees that one really thinks. But graduating from contemporary mass university gives even less guarantee: the higher education institutions yield to pragmatic standards and train people instead of presenting food for thought.

Along with the subordination of the space of free thought to instrumentality and corporational spirit we endanger not only the conditions of individual development and cultural memory. We also endanger the very habit of reflection and – in the institutional order – the spaces of thinking that are potentially subversive against the *status quo*. The market place paradigm requires obedience and is automatically tuned to marginalise the conditions of internal dialogue and critical thought. It means that the instances that hamper the automatic functioning of economic instrumentalism and bureaucratic control lose their power. We are deprived of the tools of political critique. Our *Bildung* is exchanged for vocational training that supports power relations. This situation creates conditions of non-thinking and possibly subsequent (banal) evil.

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