

# Something Is Rotten In Academia (?)

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Is something rotten in Academia?

After having spent about ten years in Academia, at famous, mostly publicly funded, universities, in several countries, I think I ought to have a clue. And I'm kind of critical. It is not that I haven't learned anything, but rather that the knowledge I find most valuable and correct, I have found outside of Academia. Having finally earned a fancy title, a Ph.D., I still wonder what really useful I actually did learn within the walls of those universities I attended.

I also wonder what I would have learnt had I not have had to learn all that not so useful stuff. Sure, studying not so good theories has helped me to recognize the really good theories. But that's not really an argument in favor of studying phony theories, is it?

I studied economics, but I suppose there are similarities to other subject in Academia. My experience is that it's at least as bad in other subjects, especially in the soft sciences.

Some might say that the problem is that they are mostly government funded, or that the government intervention is extensive. But I've also worked at a privately funded academic research institute, and the story was pretty much the same, somewhat to my surprise.

So what is wrong with Academia? Here are some thoughts I have collected. They aren't really originally mine, but I believe they are providing some good explanations to my picture of Academia.

## Why is Getting a Degree So Important Today?

As a starter, I'd like to discuss why it seems to be extremely important to have a degree these days. After all, occupations that used to necessitate a week of studies or preparations now require two years at the university.

Here is a quote by Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises (1881-1973) that I think well captures the need for degrees in our current societies. In a highly centralized society, the rulers will need a way to select those that are to progress in the hierarchy:

But since only an omniscient ruler could do without them [i.e. an actual machinery for selecting officials], special arrangements for the appointment of the officials must be made. Since the supreme authority cannot do everything, appointment to lesser positions at least must be left to subordinate authorities. To prevent this power from degenerating into mere license, it must be hedged about by regulations. In this way selection comes to be based not on genuine capacity but on compliance with certain forms, the passing of certain examinations, attendance at certain schools, having spent a certain number of

years in a subordinate position, and so on. Of the shortcomings of such methods there can be only one opinion. (*Socialism*, 1921, Chapter 9, The Position of the Individual Under Socialism, 1 Selection of Personnel and Choice of Occupation)

Indeed, there can only be one opinion, and that is that if it is knowledge that is to be advanced, such methods are far from great. Thus, degrees is a selection mechanism in a highly centralized society, i.e. where power is in the hands of the few, call it socialist, communist, fascist, state-capitalist, capitalist or whatever you like.

It's the kind of 'meritocracy' some people advocate today, where it isn't really the merits of people that matter, but that their merits have been approved by officials. And Mises contrasts this with what is required when doing ordinary business, by which he means free and voluntary exchange among equals:

The successful conduct of business demands qualities quite other than those necessary for passing examinations—even if the examinations deal with subjects bearing on the work of the position in question. A man who has spent a certain time in a subordinate capacity is far from being, for that reason, fitted for a higher post. It is not true that one learns to command by first learning to obey. Age is no substitute for personal capacity. In short, the system is deficient. Its only justification is that nothing better is known to put in its place. (*ibid.*)

I agree with everything except the last sentence, which I will comment on later.

## The Corporate Features of the Medieval Guilds

The last quote contains a seed to a further observation; spending time in a subordinate capacity, in order to obtain a higher post, learning to obey in order to be able to command, age ahead of skill — what kind of organization does that resemble?

Here's Swedish economist Eli Heckscher (1879-1952) indicating the answer:

The oldest preserved charter for a Swedish craft guild, granted to the tailors in Stockholm, dates from 1356. The *universitas sartorum*, as the tailor guild is referred to in the Latin text, was by no means a sartorial academy, but the Latin description of the guild is a useful reminder that our universities are the only surviving organizations to have preserved the corporate features of the medieval guilds. [*An Economic History of Sweden*, 1954, HUP, p.55]

Hence, the universities are the last remnant of the guilds. Like the guilds, the universities — the core of Academia today — are generally established by statute or charter. Thus, it is the centralized power that charters the university, a quite significant relationship. There have been other arrangements throughout history, in China, India, Persia, Greece, Egypt, etc., but the medieval European guild type of organization now has conquered the world.

But why the guild type of organization? The word "university" supposedly is derived from the Latin word "universitas," meaning "corporation." This is often explained by reference to the fact that the first medieval European universities often were groups of scholars-for-hire. I believe among the first was a group of lawyers that organized a "universitas" in order to train their

young people in the profession. At the same time they were able to establish their position vis-à-vis the centralized power, or powers.

I suppose not many people think of guilds as organizations of learning but rather of trading. But they also educated young people at the trades, as young persons became apprentices at the house of the Masters of trade. Then, the Masters were the professors teaching the apprentices their trade, their profession.

It is easy to imagine that many people must have believed that the knowledge about tailoring, carpentry, etc, should be lost as the guilds were abolished. How would the young tailors-to-be, etc., now learn the craft? How would young people know what to specialize in if they weren't assigned or granted apprenticeships? How would the masters be selected if not via apprenticeships?

Similarly, most people today probably believe that the only way to gain deep knowledge about a subject is to attend university. How would young people otherwise learn things? Wouldn't the end of universities mean the end of knowledge, a loss of our accumulated knowledge, of new knowledge? How would professors be selected if there were no degrees?

Perhaps those fears are mistaken or groundless, just as the fears about abolishing the other medieval guilds were proven to be groundless? After all, it seems to have been the other way around; knowledge didn't end, but expanded even more rapidly in the trades where the guilds were abolished, and new trades replaced outdated ones.

It is kind of interesting that Mises, an ardent opponent of things like the guilds, didn't see the connection Heckscher indicated.

## **The Current State of Academia**

During my years in Academia, most people I have encountered have been really good and friendly people. I've been treated less nice occasionally, but that is hardly a feature unique to Academia. I have always had, though, an implicit expectation that people that have devoted their life to ideas would be better suited at treating a young student with diverging ideas properly, but I've been wrong on that account. I have always blamed the "system" instead of the people.

Others have not been so mild in their critique of the persons within Academia; here is American journalist and writer H. L. Mencken (1880–1956):

[T]he great majority of American colleges are so incompetent and vicious that, in any really civilized country, they would be closed by the police . . . In the typical American state they are staffed by quacks and hag-ridden by fanatics. Everywhere they tend to become, not centers of enlightenment, but simply reservoirs of idiocy. Not one professional pedagogue out of twenty is a man of any genuine intelligence. The profession mainly attracts, not young men of quick minds and force of character, but flabby, feeble fellows who yearn for easy jobs. The childish mumbo-jumbo that passes for technique among them scarcely goes beyond the capacities of a moron. To take a Ph.D. in education, at most American seminaries, is an enterprise that requires no more real acumen or information than taking a degree in window dressing. [...] Their

programmes of study sound like the fantastic inventions of comedians gone insane. [*The War Upon Intelligence*, Baltimore Evening Sun, December 31, 1928]

That is some critique, right?

## **The Corruption of Licensed Savants**

The perhaps hardest critique of Academia I have encountered, however, comes from the Russian Mikhail Bakunin (1814-1876). He gives us three reasons why Academia itself is a "monstrosity":

Suppose a learned academy, composed of the most illustrious representatives of science; suppose this academy charged with legislation for and the organisation of society, and that, inspired only by the purest love of truth, it frames none but the laws in absolute harmony with the latest discoveries of science. Well, I maintain, for my part, that such legislation and such organisation would be a monstrosity, and that for two reasons: first, that human science is always and necessarily imperfect, and that, comparing what it has discovered with what remains to be discovered, we may say that it is still in its cradle. So that were we to try to force the practical life of men, collective as well as individual, into strict and exclusive conformity with the latest data of science, we should condemn society as well as individuals to suffer martyrdom on a bed of Procrustes, which would soon end by dislocating and stifling them, life ever remaining an infinitely greater thing than science.

The second reason is this: a society which should obey legislation emanating from a scientific academy, not because it understood itself the rational character of this legislation (in which case the existence of the academy would become useless), but because this legislation, emanating from the academy, was imposed in the name of a science which it venerated without comprehending — such a society would be a society, not of men, but of brutes. It would be a second edition of those missions in Paraguay which submitted so long to the government of the Jesuits. It would surely and rapidly descend to the lowest stage of idiocy.

But there is still a third reason which would render such a government impossible - namely that a scientific academy invested with a sovereignty, so to speak, absolute, even if it were composed of the most illustrious men, would infallibly and soon end in its own moral and intellectual corruption. Even today, with the few privileges allowed them, such is the history of all academies. The greatest scientific genius, from the moment that he becomes an academic, an officially licensed savant, inevitably lapses into sluggishness. He loses his spontaneity, his revolutionary hardihood, and that troublesome and savage energy characteristic of the grandest geniuses, ever called to destroy old tottering worlds and lay the foundations of new. He undoubtedly gains in politeness, in utilitarian and practical wisdom, what he loses in power of thought. In a word, he becomes corrupted. [*What is Authority?*, 1871]

As we try to force the practical life of men according to the latest doctrines of Academia, what could one expect but disaster? Imposing academic doctrines on people, the ordinary people mistakenly accepting the authority of Academia, we sink into idiocy. Finally, the officially licensed savant will inevitably become corrupted.

Corrupted? Harsh words? Well, if I think of my own time in Academia, I have to admit I showed almost no spontaneity, revolutionary hardihood and troublesome and savage energy. I saved all I had of that for my free-lance reading and writing. Every time I said to myself: "—I'll do this to please the examiner," or: "—I'll do it this way despite the fact I'd rather do it this other way," or: "—I don't think this angle is right at all, but I'll do it since that will give me the research grants," I was indeed acting in a corrupt way. If I would actually be pretending to try to advance knowledge, how would it be possible if I didn't follow my own reason and judgement? What other yardsticks are there? Appeal to authority, perhaps?

## Academic Freedom Revisited

This brings me to the perhaps trickiest part — academic freedom. This is a loose concept that varies from country to country, but I will think of it as the right of people within Academia to research any topic they like or express any thoughts they like.

This kind of freedom differs from other kinds in that it is claimed within an organization officially chartered by the central power. This means that not everybody can claim it, only those within Academia. Hence, some will always be excluded, since, obviously, not everyone can be within Academia. As soon as this kind of academic freedom is larger than the freedom of the ordinary non-academic, this implies a breach of the principle of equal freedom of all. True, some don't want to be free in all regards, and might voluntarily and rightfully abstain from some freedom. But the breach of the principle at hand stems from the charter imposed by those in power without any consent by all.

Those in power make sure some have more freedom than others. But what about free entry to the Academia, wouldn't that give a kind of equality after all? That rationalization might seem plausible, but collapses as soon as we see that not everyone can be within Academia at the same time, and everybody can't be there all the time.

What about the fringe institutes and universities that are not chartered but still pretend as if they were? Sure, they might be perfectly OK with regard to the important equality issue (equal freedom of all, if not voluntarily abstained), and the question of academic freedom would then simply be a matter of contract between employer and employee. However, it is still strange that such places should yearn to become like the chartered places, at least after the delicate and insightful critique delivered above.

It seems that academic freedom mainly means working in officially chartered places, most often also on the public payroll, perhaps secured for life, exhuming whatever silly ideas the people in power demand, or the people that want to be in power demand. As soon as it involves some kind of freedom the ordinary non-chartered citizen can't claim, academic freedom is the corruption of an idea.

There is still reason to defend academic freedom at times. If at times freedom generally would be steadily diminishing, and the freedom without of Academia was falling short of that within, it would perhaps be a good idea to advocate even a chartered version of academic freedom, if this simply is the best there is. And cases of such need for a defense of academic freedom in cases of emergency have been plenty. Perhaps we are even experiencing such times right now?

## Finishing Remarks

Regardless of the heavy critique delivered by the thinkers above, I must clearly state that I would personally tolerate the existence of such an Academia, as long as the charter affected only those that voluntary had agreed to it, just as I would accept any kind of guild as long as the charter affected only those that voluntary had agreed to it.

That might appear like a contradiction — a selective charter. But that contradiction is dissolved as soon as we leave the setting of a territorial monopolist power and imagine "non-territorial governance." In such a system, the laws don't follow the territory, but rather the person. Thus, in one and the same place, it would be possible for people to submit to various systems of laws. It is also possible for an individual to change system, i.e. the systems are in a way competing in best serving people's needs, or start a new in case desired. (For the historical account of the existence of such a system of governance, see my essays '*To the Monopolists of All Parties*' and '*Non-Territorial Governance — Mankind's Forgotten Legacy*').

Thus, a charter would not be exclusive in that territory, only exclusive for the members of that particular chartering authority. It would be a selective charter, only applicable to those within a certain system of laws.

Personally I would not advocate any kind of guild. Maybe Academia doesn't have to be the way it is, but on the other hand, perhaps it is inherent in the guild structure of Academia? Many people seem to think the Academia is corrupt today, but at the same time believe that once they got the tenured position or would run the show, things would be different.

I'm not too sure about that. The system seems to corrupt even the best, making them intolerant to destroying old tottering worlds and laying the foundations of new. This intolerance has for example transformed my main subject during my time in Academia, economics, from a search of genuine knowledge about universally valid principles into a means of imposing ideals on others by means of for example mathematics and statistics. The means have become the ends.

In this regard, Academia is like the territorial monopolist States of today; they can be tolerant, but tend to the opposite. Especially as soon as means are mistaken for ends, as they so often tend to do. Academia can be a place of genuine learning, but, as Bakunin put it, they "would infallibly and soon end in its own moral and intellectual corruption [...] such is the history of all academies".

Dare I conclude? Something *is* rotten in Academia.

Final note: In case you know of further quotes from fairly well known thinkers, writers, etc., I would be interested in those. I will give you due credit if desirable. I'm sure there must be tons of relevant quotes out there. Thanks!