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**THE IVORY TOWER AND THE SEAT OF POWER\***

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**0. The Point of the Present Lecture**

The thesis or theses I wish to present here may, and hopefully should, sound rather trivial. The public role which concerned philosophers should take these days, I suppose, is somewhat similar to the role of preachers in earlier days, namely to state what should be obvious and treated as obvious but is nonetheless systematically overlooked.

The system of higher education always has a significant place in national political affairs. Politically indifferent academics may legitimately ignore this. Those concerned with the welfare of the system of higher education, however, cannot afford this luxury. Further, intellectuals, including academics, are a significant political factor even when passive. Even were all of them to ignore all politics, including the ever-present political importance of the educational system for national politics, they would still play a particularly significant role in national politics as what Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld call the opinion leadership. This way the maintenance of responsible government, and the maintenance of democracy, much depends on what intellectuals demand of the system. Any regime may be endangered by the negative attitudes that opinion leaders may have towards public affairs -- even if it is merely passively negative.

The danger is there, but in the United States today, as in most of the industrialized world, the risk for democracy is these days minimal. It is therefore advisable to let the system of higher education suffer benign neglect - on the condition that it performs its standard services to the community reasonably well. This can be achieved by the transfer of the power to license certain professions from the academy to civil organizations, with the increased efficiency of both the licensing system and the educational one.

There are two negative attitudes that are dangerous here and now. One is the cynicism that is rampant on many a university campus, especially in the form of the endorsement of **Realpolitik**, so-called, namely of the doctrine that right is might and there is no way in which politics can ever be moral, especially when this theory is found defunct and is boosted by a conspiracy theory of big capital. The other dangerous attitude rampant in campuses is the hostility to democracy that is common there, especially as the preference for technocracy over

democracy, the doctrine that the general public cannot and should not try to control the expert, especially not the expert in the ivory tower. Strangely, this preference for technocracy is often enough coupled with the technological determinism that is usually grossly mislabeled as Marxism and that is all too often Luddite in tendency and regularly anti-intellectual to boot.

What is particularly regrettable is that the much needed reform of the present system of higher education is blocked by a collusion of those members of the faculty who are left-wing reactionaries with the members of the administration of the educational system who are right-wing reactionaries. They collude to keep their hold on the little political power that the current system grants them. As Albert Einstein has so astutely observed, it is very easy to reform education: all that is needed is to take away the power from the teacher.

I shall now go over the same message, in an attempt to remove the dangerous myths that make it less obvious than it should be, and say a few words on the reform that the system of higher education is in urgent need for the democratic culture to survive.

### **1. The standards of academic propriety**

The metaphor of the ivory tower is not liked in academic circles. It means simply that the university is a secluded place, a sort of a shelter, whose members are privileged as sheltered individuals exempt from the duties of partaking in the humdrum of practical affairs. I do not share this dislike. I take the system of higher education to be an ivory tower, and I think no one need apologize for that. We are not on trial. In particular, I have no criticism of academics who not politically or socially committed; they may legitimately choose to be socially and politically passive or to be active merely to meet the incentives which the institution they belong to happen to set.

No doubt, there are places more sheltered and less sheltered, more and less deservedly so. No doubt the higher education system is still sheltered, even though less than it used to be when it was still run by religious institutions, as it used to be for most of the duration of its existence, East and West. No doubt, the higher education system is no less deserving of its seclusion than some the institutions whose chief aim is to provide shelter or asylum of all sorts. Nevertheless, members of the higher-education system do not like to be reminded that they lead relatively sheltered life and are relatively exempt from many duties that others gladly undertake.

The reason for this, I propose, is many layered. First, the metaphor may be understood in an exaggerated fashion: the higher-education system is not that secluded, its members are not that remote from the trials and tribulations of the nation and of common humanity, and so on. Let us agree on this without debate: it

is true of every metaphor, and so it does not explain the specific dislike of the metaphor at hand. There is then the fact that the security of the higher-education system is supported by the taxpayer. This raises the question, can the higher-education system be made cheaper by reducing the level of security it offers its members? This question is regularly asked apropos of the tenure system so prevalent the higher-education system. It is an odd fact that tenure is common in other systems, and yet it is not so much noticed as the tenure of the academics. Moreover, academics are usually quick to point out that tenure is a safeguard against attempts to curb academic freedom.

Without tenure the cost of teaching is greatly reduced, and there is no question that this is so not only for higher education. If the matter of saving money is at and, then certainly abolishing the lecture system will go a greater length than abolishing tenure. If someone will insist that lectures are of some use -- which is a bit of fancy -- the they could not object to having tapes of lectures by Stephen Jay Gould and Isaac Asimov and even John Gielgud freely circulate on campuses and have students use them on their video screens in their chambers at their own leisure and have their instructors have tutorials instead of lectures. It is clear that for saving money the abolition of tenure is not the best proposal.

Yet, the argument that tenure is needed for the maintenance of academic freedom is equally questionable. Were it so, we could exemplify it by constructing a non-tenure subsystem and see if it is less free to express its opinions. This, incidentally, is unnecessary: it is common knowledge, which surfaces regularly when the events of the Post World War II period are recounted, known as the McCarthyite witch-hunt -- that a frank and unconstitutional suppression of political opinion in both the media and the higher-education system did take place in the United States then; in many countries of the free-world so-called this is still the case. Of the Communist countries, I will not speak here, except to say that on this period of democratization the democratic world should be offering them more democratic models of systems of education to emulate.

The tenure system should be preserved -- but simply in order to keep the academic system an ivory tower, not for any other excuse. And therefore it is better to admit that the first function of the system is to offer refuge, and it should only offer education as a sideline -- which it did for centuries and until the end of World War II. The dislike for the metaphor of the ivory tower should therefore be tackled head on. Why is the metaphor disliked so?

What stands behind the dislike of the metaphor of the ivory tower is at least to a large extent the idea that the academics receive what they do or should deserve; either they do not have as much security ad

seclusion as suggested or they deserve it or they should be more involved in public affairs so as to deserve it. All of these options are to be rejected off-hand as irrelevant and as never applicable anyway. We are not on trial and we should do what we are bound to do or what we volunteer to do, no more and no less. It is unreasonable to claim that anyone in any system gets their deserts; it is contradicted by the very idea that the security is needed in order to defend the sacred academic freedom. When it is declared inevitable that cooks have great access to the pot, it is admitted that they deserve it; when tenure is declared essential for the cause of academic freedom, likewise, it is admitted that tenure is not a matter of just desert.

The idea that academics receive what they deserve is very popular indeed. It is amazing that any members of any set should say that in their set justice prevails; it is doubly amazing that members of the higher educational system should ever even suspect that such a claim is any near the truth. Just to make my view clear in case anyone present wishes to defend this statement as even slightly resembling the truth, I should make a detour and say explicitly what is my view of academic justice.

The system of higher education is more just than other sub-systems -- political, military or corporate -- of our great and noble democracy, and in two respects. First, the higher education system is the only one not investing much effort to penalize excellence. In all cases of penalized academic excellence that I have met, it was either due to the insistence of the victims on their rights with no readiness to compromise, or it was an accident that some vicious or jealous individual had an easy kill. Second, injustices regarding the recognition of contributions to human knowledge are short-lived, even if injustices to their originators often cannot be rectified because by then they have finished their careers. It takes about a decade to get to the power that is prerequisite for the ability to harm a colleague, by which time the youngest powerful are about 40 years old, leaving each of them a quarter of a century to do harm before retirement, by which time much of their injustice to ideas has been repaired by newer scholars too busy with their own vendettas to care about worming old ones.

So much for the good news. As to the bad news, in times of rapid change, it is a luxury to let every good idea wait for a generation before it receives a hearing. Here, however, I am only airing ideas well over a generation old already. Further, there is no foundation to the suggestion that academic institutions go by the book regarding admission, grading, rewards, hiring, promotions and tenure. There is no foundation to the suggestion that they can go by the book. The paradigm case is the criterion for awarding doctorates, which is always that the degree is awarded for an original contribution to human knowledge, which is laughable, especially as nobody knows what that is; the pretense that doctoral dissertations normally are contributions to

human knowledge is embarrassing, especially since we know that even were it clear what the criterion is it would not be applied, as evidenced from the fact that most doctoral dissertations that are publicly available are clearly sub-standard by much humbler criteria which are thus more reasonable. And, finally, there is no reason to suggest that the book of rules is so good that it deserves to be followed, especially not in education. If we merely admit to our college straight A high-school graduates, we thereby endorse and strengthen the methods by which different schools across the land grade, and of course they do so in very different ways. Moreover, as Abraham Flexner has observed over half-a-century ago, this way tremendous incentives appear across the board to grant high grades. At times a school or an educational sub-system develops such a bad reputation for so long that at last it is clear that something should be done to reform the system. This happened when Abraham Flexner was called first to diagnose the American medical educational system and then to reform it. Times have changed radically, new situations are crying for reforms, but no one dare speak up and challenge the unbelievably dictatorial powers of the deans of the more reputed schools of medicine. The most that is done to accommodate the need for change is that the more reputed colleges refuse entry to graduates of notoriously poor schools -- unless they pass some supplementary tests. This is no news, of course; it is, after all, the rationale behind the disaster of the scholastic aptitude tests and the equivalent tests for graduates wishing to enter graduate schools. It is impossible to condemn colleges for their support of so much of the evil that goes on in the nation's high schools and their support-systems, but at least we can agree not to be self-righteous about it.

Perhaps it matters little who is admitted as compared with who graduates. How is the system able to regulate grading while maintaining academic freedom? By subtle pressures on its members, of course -- which is not the best, cleanest, and most democratic manner known. I will mention here only one, the major tool for pressure. It is the ethos -- of the college's or of the educational system as a whole -- its general aspiration. This is at best the aspiration for excellence, which means the coveting of the accolades of recognition, which means accepting the values of the existing social system and its judgments as unquestionably just and so the active and aggressive support of the status quo. This, incidentally, makes a joke of the strongest argument of the technocratic anti-democrats, who in action endorse the judgments of the non-expert public, not to say of the media as such. No matter how well sociologists of science have proven that the Nobel Committee is as narrow-minded and unjust in matters scientific as it is in matters literary, almost no one says the Nobel Prize should not be coveted and its laureates should not be praised for their having received it and their universities

should not get brownie-points for employing them (these Brownie points constitute tremendous incentives for powerful institutions of higher learning to put pressure on the Nobel Committee: the Committee's operations, too, are not always caused by lack of intelligence: lack of courage helps too). It has been recorded that a citizen has received a local prize for having received the Nobel Prize. And can the local dignitaries be blamed?

So much for the detour about academic justice, or rather about its absence. Yet the academic system too is not on trial. There is little doubt that the injustices are smaller than elsewhere and are inevitable unless great efforts are invested in preventing them. As long as there are no institutions to devise repeatedly new means of preventing pressures on the educational system, the picture in it is not and cannot be very much better than what the social conditions at large impose; and it is already better than that; it will be a miracle if means to improve it will be instituted, and this will be against the order of priorities of the nation at large.

This judgment compares justice in the educational system and outside it. This goes against the pious expressions of expectations from it to be above the norm by far and all by itself. These pious expressions are naive and/or a way to make unreasonable demands. Moreover, these pious expressions lead to a shock through the discovery of the obvious fact that even in the academy perfection is unattainable, which shock often leads to cynicism and to conspiracy theories. Here, as in moral philosophy in general, the point to realize is that maturity is the outgrowth not of naiveté, but of the cynicism and the conspiracy theories that follow it all too often. Most academics, I observe, are still morally immature.

## **2. The Inner Politics of Academic Institutions**

Despite the imperfections of the democratic system and the academic institution within which academics happen to work, they are permitted to operate reasonably intelligently within it as long as they are law-abiding citizens. This seems to be a thesis hardly worth mention, not to say defense. Yet I can report that it is constantly rejected by ever so many academic individuals and administrators -- on the ground of the pious claim that educators and researchers ought to be individuals above the average: they must be dedicated to their task or else their place is not in the academy. I find this kind of pious claim dangerous, and attempts to follow it, even if not illegal -- which I doubt -- are obviously quite immoral and quite harmful to the system as a whole.

It is a well-known fact that the system of higher education used to be self-governing, with a minimal administrative help and with administrative positions of power rotating among its members. Today it is said that there are half as many administrators as faculty. This is a gross misrepresentation of the facts as every attempt to check how these figures are arrived at will easily indicate: on the average the ratio between administrative

staff and faculty is at least one-to-one (even if we ignore the fact that faculty works nine months a year and administrators eleven, in excess of more than one-fifth and even if we ignore the worse fact that administrators have much superior secretarial assistance than faculty); but I shall abide by the accepted estimate now.

Why do we need one pen pusher for every two faculty members? what are so many administrators doing day in day out eleven months each year? In order to maintain the normal flow of whatever flows in the rivers of academe, of course. For example, we have to make sure that no student registers to a class in French who knows no French, that students do not dare register for higher algebra if they possess no mastery of elementary algebra. Why? Who will want to listen to a lecture course in an incomprehensible tongue? All those who wish to be graded, of course, without augmenting their comprehension, heaven forbid. And the need for administrative prohibition of degrees unaccompanied by increased comprehension clearly rests on the supposition that but for the vigilant eye of the conscientious all-seeing administrators this is exactly what might happen. Comprehension, then, is by itself not necessary: it is secured only by the system of administrative approval! An interesting outcome of this is that comprehension is now no longer sufficient: I report to you that quite regularly individuals who pass exams with flying colors do not have their grades recorded in their grade-sheets unless they correctly prove that they qualify for the course -- by documents provided by other pen pushers, of course, and have registered for the course, and have paid for the course. Prior qualification and registration and pay are the essentials so that we can prove comprehension and mastery of the material; if these are not accompanied with the proper documentation, then they are doomed. This is common knowledge, expressed every time people are concerned, as they rightly are, to see to it that administrative criteria are proper: it is because the standards of propriety of faculty and administration are intensionally different that there is room for the concern that they should be coextensive, if I may use the logician's jargon. I declare that the concern is reasonable given the two sets, the checking of students' proficiency both by faculty and by the administrative staff; but that there is room for neither; schools are for education, not for grading.

I check myself: two corrections are required here. First, grading may very well be a part of the educational process. For example, students benefit if they are told regularly how well they do, as every coach knows. But that is an internal affair: the coach has no need for any mediator, and in cases in which mediators are called for, their service is required during the process, not as recorders of initial and final results. Second, some examinations are required for the defense of civil society, such as examinations for proficiency as drivers of motorcars and as teachers and judges and surgeon -- briefly, as practitioners of any skill that makes them

dangerous to the community at large and to innocent by-standers of all sorts.

What skill should be licensed? This is a difficult question and it requires ad hoc solutions. This is acknowledged in the research community in the United States that supports the demand for licenses -- official or at least unofficial -- for research on humans in matters of genetic engineering only: this community has approved of the disqualification of a researcher for grants on the ground that he had performed such experiments in Italy and Israel. These are not countries that take experimentation on humans lightly; but they do not impose this specific prohibition: they consider sufficient their general regulations concerning experimentation on humans. How did the American research community decide which legal system is better in this respect? Improperly, for sure. They did not even study the question whether the variance in question is rooted in deep philosophical differences or is merely accidental. And these matters are very complex to begin with. Thus, in some countries horology is licensed, in some not. I myself think horology should never be licensed as it is never harmful to have inept clock makers and the market mechanism may be trusted to eject them without much fuss. This cannot be said of drivers or surgeons for fear that by the time they are ejected by the market mechanism they may have harmed others.

This, then, is the reasonable democratic criterion for grading: we have to license occupations where ineptness is harmful to the public so as to protect the public. This is only a criterion, and its application is not at all unproblematic. We still do not know how to keep drunken drivers off the road and we do not know how much damage teachers in the higher education system can do and if they need to be licensed and if so how. I know of schoolteachers who after having arrived became academic teachers because the educational authorities where they settled down did not recognize the licenses to teach which they had received in their old countries. The Robbins Report in England reports a high level of agreement among faculty in Britain about the need to train faculty to teach, yet, of course, nothing could be done about it and a quarter of a century later the situation is the same.

We can leave to the legislators the question of licenses to drive. Let us examine for a brief while the question, who should issue licenses for qualifications taught in universities and colleges, such as medicine, the law, accounting, teaching? There are different answers to this questions, depending on the country and the profession in question. The available options are, the government, national or regional, hardly ever local, public committees, always national and they are rare anyway, the professional organization, national, seldom ever regional and never local, and institutions of higher learning, always local.



Does all that make sense? Not that I have ever heard of. The worst about the fact that licenses are local is well known: there are incentives for lower standards, and then Gresham's law sets in. The institutions of higher learning that compete with an institution with reputation must follow suit. Of course, that institution may lose its reputation, and even its accreditation. But such things take long time, and efforts to raise standards again are very taxing. All this can be avoided by centralizing public control. The faculty of every institution that has the power to grant license fiercely object: they behave as incumbents usually do: they find excuses for their greed and they do not even examine the possibility that they are better off without the burden of the responsibility of the power of issuing licenses. This breeds cynicism, and cynicism is expensive to the individual and the system alike; the way to avoid it is to discuss responsibly the question, is reform advisable?

That the cost is high is clear: the faculty cannot handle the administration of the licensing and so they need administrators and so they open the floodgate for cynicism and for the powerful operation of Parkinson's law, which has as a corollary the well-known general fact that the maid tends to become the mistress of the house and becomes one when the initial mistress has lost her orientation; cynicism will do this every time. Thus, though it is clear that schools cannot function without faculty but can function without administration at least as well, the impression one gets and the opinion one hears regularly go the other way.

What would happen if the higher education system would lose all its power? It will need little administration, its faculty will have little or nothing to quarrel about, students will have no incentive to go to school except if they have the incentive to study. Moreover, it will be clearly a buyer's market: as there are more candidates for classes with practical value, namely those that help their graduates pass exams outside school, then for classes conducted for pure fun, such as the arts and the sciences, one can easily expect the crowds to go there. Query: is it possible that no students will enroll to fun classes? The supporters of the status quo say, yes: culture will disappear without strong incentives of the kind the higher-education system is offering these days. Be it so; this will dispense with the story that there is no room for all applicants; let there be open enrollment to fun classes right now!

This proposal of mine is not meant in earnest, of course. I know full well that fun classes are nowadays taught with fake incentives: it takes little effort to find out that students register for fun classes not for fun but because they are informed that a bachelor's degrees improves their initial opportunities in the job market. Is this true? The information available now supports this claim. Why? Is the situation economically justified? I do not think so, but I am willing to see an empirical study to check the claims.

This proposal of mine is not meant in earnest either, of course. It takes little effort to find that there is great pressure not to perform empirical studies of the degree of efficiency of academic education, especially of the degree of efficiency of teaching. Such studies cannot be performed in the first place without the presentation of some criteria. From time to time some individual or groups of academics publish a volume in which their criteria of excellence are described and then some pseudo-empirical data are produced in order to show how much short of the criteria the nation falls. Such works are often best-sellers of short duration, so that there is much incentive to redo them. I have reviewed a few of these works and I can report that what is amazing about the studies they report is not their pseudo-data but their criteria, which all too often are too vulgar for words. I call them vulgar because it is the mark of vulgarity to present criteria that look tough and are irrelevant to the matter at hand. But I shall leave these for now, as my agenda for today is still long.

### **3. Academics as Opinion Leaders**

I hope I have made it amply clear that it is very nice, for both the institution for higher learning and the community at large, if the institution of higher learning and their members are left to their devices and allowed to ignore the political scene altogether, with the proviso that they should be able to offer the educational services which the community legitimately demands, and do so reasonably well, regardless of the political means that have brought about that demand, and provided that members of the faculty may join any legitimate political activity they wish to join.

There remain two questions. First, should faculty be allowed to act as groups or does this amount to the unhealthy introduction of a political bias? This question is too sensitive to discuss here, especially since bias does exist everywhere -- political and other -- hopefully within civil bounds. There is then the question, should the faculty be permitted to be politically subversive, to join subversive organizations not declared illegal, and so on? This question either has no specific relevance to the academic community or else it is a sensitive question which goes beyond political deviance to encompass all matters of deviant faculty who advocate their own kind of deviance, such as sexual, moral and religious deviance. This should be the last topic of my present discussion, as it has to do with the question, can we leave the academic system to benign neglect as I advocate?

One of the enemies of democracy in the American educational system is a famous and brilliant philosopher by the name of Paul Feyerabend. He advocates the most vulgar thesis: anything goes! And to make it quite clear that he does not mean it in the refined sense in which Rabelais meant it when he said to his refined academicians, do as you please, he explains: it is not that the refined can do what they please without

being improper: there is nothing that can properly be deemed improper. He says, voodoo and astrology can just as well serve society and individual as science -- perhaps better. Perhaps he does not say the statement I have just attributed to him: we had a couple of public bouts, he and I, and he claims that I do not know what I am talking about. Perhaps so. Perhaps all he says is that since the higher educational system is supported by the tax-payer, democratic decisions to open a department for voodoo or for astrology or for parapsychology are quite in order. Are they?

Supposing we say, as I do, no; this is dead wrong. Can I still claim that I adhere to my democratic creed or have I crossed the lines to the enemy camp of the technocrats?

Let me admit at once that I do not think all democratic systems are legitimate. The limitations on democracy constitute a fascinating subject that cannot be properly be discussed here; suffice it to be noted this. The limits on democracy rest in part on logical grounds, as expounded in Karl Popper's monumental if outdated **The Open Society and Its Enemies**. (The many can decide, Popper quotes Heraklitos to say, that the one should rule: we may disband democracy in a democratic fashion, as was done in Germany in 1933.) In part the limits on democracy rest on empirical grounds: the citizenry should be able to sustain democracy; this depends on the level of general education of the population and on other means, such as the available communication system.

How does this reflect on our question? This is a question of fact, not of theory. That one department of parapsychology in an institution of higher learning is not a threat to democracy is both a commonsense and an empirical fact. But to claim that were parapsychology as respectable as nuclear physics without threatening democracy is to go too far: the matter invited scrutiny, and perhaps overtakes our present fund of knowledge.

And so I have arrived at my final point: it is a prerequisite for democracy that the cynical and the anti-democrat and the anti-democratic cynic and the technocrat and the Luddite and conspiracy theorist all be permitted to join the system of higher education. Perhaps they are even needed as antidote to complacency and to the foolish belief that democracy is perfect and should be defended rather than repeatedly attacked. Yet there is, possibly, a critical mass: if most intellectuals are such, then even if they are politically inactive, they may possibly destroy democracy; I for one have no clear opinion in mind on the matter.

Let me report, however, that we are coming close to an empirical test of the possible views on the matter. In philosophy the situation is for decades this way. The two leading school of philosophy at present are the Continental and the Anglo-American, so-called. The former is for government by a cultural elite and the

other for technocracy; neither has a good word for democracy. Of the rest, the majority are the Marxists and the Thomists, neither of which is democratic in the least. The rest of the rest are few and far between. So much for the philosophers. In the departments of the social sciences, including the departments of political science and excluding the department of economics, Marxism reigns supreme. As to the departments of economics, they are largely reactionary of the right wing, and as incentives to inaction they equal the reactionaries on the left.

What is Marxism is hard to say; I have discussed this question in a few essays and I have no opportunity to do so now. Let me only repeat that it is a mixture that has little or nothing to do with the historical Marx beyond the fact that the movement is pro-Soviet and pro-Chinese, not in detail, since its members pride themselves of being anti-Stalinist, but in accepting Stalin's edict that one should never criticize the Soviet Union openly. This chief characteristic of the Marxists may be fading now in the days of the attempts of the Soviet Union to open up and democratize. But even if this is entirely so, the hostility to democracy will not disappear overnight. This then is the limitation of my claim that the ivory tower can suffer benign neglect: this is so on the condition that it is not a danger to democracy at large by being willy nilly the opinion leader. We have an example for it from 1933 Germany, as I have already mentioned. I think this example is very remote. I therefore recommend benign neglect and hope that this will not lead to the development of too much voodoo and too much conspiracy theories in the normal institutions of higher learning and research.