



**GROUPE DE RECHERCHE
INNOVATIONS ET SOCIÉTÉS
(GRIS)**



Centre Maurice Halbwachs



**PROBLÉMATIQUE
FOR
AN EXPLORATORY CONFERENCE**

**WITHSTANDING INFLUENCE:
ACADEMIC INDEPENDENCE AND ITS
DISCONTENTS**

**(L'INDEPENDANCE SCIENTIFIQUE
ET SES DEPLAISIRS)**

**27 AND 28 MARS 2008
UNIVERSITY OF ROUEN
MAISON DE L'UNIVERSITÉ**

PROBLÉMATIQUE*

This is an international conference that will focus on the possibility and meaning of academic independence today. It will provide an opportunity to revisit the relation between the production of knowledge and the exertion power in all its forms, particularly the subtle forms via which knowledge is recognised as power. In order to stimulate critical debate on the current state of academic independence, the conference will bring together researchers from various sciences who are interested in tensions in the relationship between power and independent knowledge or have been at the origin of such tensions.

The normalisation of academic status is certainly linked to the processes of building scientific knowledge and the paradigmatic forms that they take. But that is not unrelated to the socio-political processes which surround the production of knowledge. Postindustrial modernity is a universe based on smoothly-run institutional processes. There is no departure from planned developments that is considered tolerable, and even less so, desirable; there is no distinction between disruption and risk. Academic self-censorship has now an additional layer to consider: the dimension of the research process as an institutional project that should not be endangered. It somehow seems that like transport systems, the academic system is supposed to lead to previously agreed destinations at a predicted time. Interdependency between institutions is at stake, funding policies depend on this regularity and there is no space for deviation, surprise, or delay. Success is forecasted delivery and all else is failure.

‘Public opinion’, conventional wisdom and established paradigms can be as influential as funding policies, official prizes and promotion policies in exerting pressure on the direction of academic thought. ‘Critical’ attitudes can also be an obstacle and it is useful to remind that in the middle of powerful counter-cultural movements people did not admit that a myrmecologist, like E.O. Wilson, could produce knowledge on humans. Social scientists know that the less conscious one is of limits to one’s thought and action, the more effective these limits are. The mechanisms of dependence in the production of knowledge are certainly diverse and elastic enough to appear as only applying to others, not ourselves.

“Cautiousness” and Self-Censorship

Being “cautious” about what one is willing to research and publish is a practical means to avoid unsettling considerations. “Caution” is a subtle term for self-censorship when it comes to reasonably reliable knowledge and information. Reflexive discourses reinforce the need for caution; one worries “how this will look if it is used in the wrong context”, if “the media run away with it” or if brows are raised and doors closed in powerful places. These are all implicit considerations that shape academic reports and guide public lectures to the point of practically banishing the airing of controversial views. That is a curiously unexpected outcome in a world where knowledge is supposed to have increasingly broken away from common sense for at least three centuries, i.e. since the decline of geocentrism.

The normalising framework that is imposed by institutional predictability can be seen as a harness on knowledge production. In this context, implicit control in the choice of subjects and the direction of findings is imposed as part of the very formatting of knowledge production processes; ‘caution’ is

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already embedded in the possibility of conducting research. In this context, the academic community seems to have become increasingly amenable to economic organisation and political governance.

Support as Selection

Predictability in knowledge production is often desirable. Most people do wish to see the elimination of malaria, a vaccine against AIDS or an automated system that averts car collision. The direction of the research process is largely a matter of orienting private and public funds towards chosen priorities. The vehicle for delivering predictability is the project-based design of contemporary funding schemes. Although project-based research starts attracting criticism over foreclosing ambitious “blue sky” exploration, it is essentially a structure that assimilates knowledge production to any other production. In particular, it can guarantee the narrowing down of the research effort so as to make it conducive to a practical end, thus compatible with the market and with public policy.

Subjecting research to the priorities of corporate and political governance is not an authoritarian practice. It is rather a matter of increasing available resources to the point of generating competition. As paradigms are increasingly built on resources, an issue that needs to be considered is the ‘collateral losses’ of such resource allocation. Universities and research centres grow to a point where withdrawal of existing support cannot be envisaged. Dependence upon continuing flows of funds is simply obligatory and that magnifies the impact of the slightest divergence with the funder’s objectives. Controversies are increasingly stillborn via self-censure and in the rare cases when that is not true, suggestions will readily come from colleagues and Heads of Departments about caution being displayed and concessions being made. Academic careers heavily depend on the implicit understanding that a reasonable degree of cooperation is necessary. This accounts for a generalised culture which integrates that implicit understanding, a norm that inevitably permeates the process from eligible PhD topics to peer-reviewing for publication. In medicine, for example, we come to a point where “it has been claimed that at least 50% of all publications on medical treatments in the *British Medical Journal*, *Lancet*, and *New England Journal of Medicine* have been written by an unacknowledged ghost writer”¹, employed by a pharmaceutical company and using the name of an ‘independent’ academic researcher.

Unsaid and Unwritten

It seems natural that in social life many of us believe that some things are better left unsaid. What is unnatural, however, is that the same practice survives when pursuing new knowledge. The major advantage of the unsaid is that it does not have to become a secret. No conscience and no procedure is compromised when “sensitive” issues do not become explicit. This is a major avenue towards passive conformity to established lines of tolerance and acceptability. Taboo fields, issues and connections simply do not appear as formulated questions. For example, in the social sciences one does not ask questions about comparative performance and failure of individuals and groups that find themselves in similar conditions, i.e. about why some disadvantaged groups behave differently from others or about altruistic visions of society that may exist among a minority of the upper class. Similarly, one cannot

¹ BMJ 2007;334:208; BMJ 2004;329:937; 2004;329:1345.

formulate questions about lower class women “liberating” middle class women by supplying domestic labour or about the inner structure of exploitation within discriminated groups.

This is not to deny that leaving entire social fields in the dark is a meaningful, albeit deplorable, process; it maintains the established order of things and gives that order priority over the facts and their interpretation. The issue is rather how compatible research is with that priority. The clearest examples of that dilemma lay unsurprisingly in our ideas of ourselves. It is part of the current hegemony that it is better not to talk about biological differences between humans because such knowledge can be exploited by racists, sexists and other bigots and essentialists. This in fact means that we are not allowed to defend human equality for what it is in the last analysis, i.e. an intentional ideology. There is little to convince anyone that when we find ourselves in a weak position (be that unemployment, illness, little physical force or childhood as such) other people can very easily make us socially inferior if we are not protected by systems that we have collectively established. Politics, law and value systems are exactly about *not* accepting factual (or so called “natural”) differences. In that sense, the market-proven overall capacity to secure revenue is in fact more telling of factual personal capacities than a rudimentary and disputed figure on intelligence or a degree of beauty²; yet, we are allowed to discuss unemployment rates and substance dependency in various parts of a society but not intelligence or physical attractiveness. In other words, it is impossible today for research to proceed towards the idea that, just like punching force or agility are different qualities of various muscles, there are various capacities to the organ know as brain and various types of physical attractiveness; none of these justifies inequality any more than the difference in punching force or agility, particularly since the latter would probably be more relevant to fitness, were they not controlled by intentional legal systems. The expected result of lifting taboos for research in “sensitive” directions would be more anti-discrimination laws on substantiated and unjustified distinctions, leading to more equal societies.

The Public

A permanent assumption is that societies are innocent of the limitations imposed on their allegedly independent systems. In fact an ‘innocent public’ is a constitutive part of most narratives that promote or defend research independence. Politicians, officials and the media put forward the idea of a “shocked” public opinion when supposedly unthinkable breeches of independence become widely known. From financial crime to restraining research activities and findings, the public is led to represent an absolute ethical position. Contrary to what might seem obvious, this phenomenon may contribute to the process of academic *dependence* as it casts cases of undue influence as *exceptions* to an otherwise pure and autonomous system of knowledge production.

We can look at that arrangement as an influencing process in itself. The public is kept away from facts that it does not wish to know (e.g. benefits to humans from experiments involving animals) or facts that the techno-scientific-industrial system does not wish the public to know (e.g. the consequences of investment cycles for marketed products of research); in exchange, public opinion is used as a tool of governance so that ‘undue influence’ on academic knowledge production appears as a matter of isolated actions rather than a representation of general, permanent and dominant relations.

² Cf. Richard Dawkins’s regret that one of the consequences of Nazism is to have delegitimized free scientific debate in many areas.

Overall Conservatism

Media images of the Academia are dependent upon its independence. The research process is dependent upon funding. Academic governance today is dependent upon maintaining that equilibrium. Academic and research institutions are deeply aware of this fact and develop reflexes towards the early aversion of any controversy that may evolve into a 'risk'. Scientific paradigms and their opposition are increasingly overdetermined by the probability of exposure to 'media risks' or 'funding risks' and, accordingly, shaped by them. This preventive attitude has certainly modified the governing priorities of academic institutions. In particular, likely perceptions of internal processes by external actors become of primary importance and lead to informal but effective pressures towards the immediate smothering of possible sources of controversy. The combination of these factors essentially means that a generalised aversive attitude establishes a pervasive conservative spirit. Knowledge, however, is by definition change, and this opposition makes for a fundamental tension which, directly or indirectly, cuts across the research process. That systemic tension cannot be resolved via individual positions, however critical and ethical they may be. We probably need a formal framework awarding priorities to specific values, a form of an International Scientific Constitution, which can place the governance of research emulation in its contemporary settings of power and influence.

Naturally, contributors to this conference may not necessarily agree with all views expressed in this document but they will be concerned with the issue of academic independence and prepared to discuss their opinions and experiences in a context of open debate.