

ACADEMIC FREEDOM: LAST STAND OF THE IVORY TOWER OR MODEL FOR EDUCATION?

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Abstract

This article argues that the idea of academic freedom provides a conceptual angle for a critique of the ongoing educational reforms in Norway and in other countries, driven by economically oriented quality management (efficiency, standardization) and labor market orientation. A critique requires to make visible the price for the reforms, in particular the loss of freedom; here Hannah Arendt's definition of double-tiered freedom is useful, and its main characteristics, the absence of instrumentality and its element of play can not only be applied to university research but to all levels of education.

Keywords: freedom, Arendt, play, Huizinga, instrumentality

1. Introduction

While the concept of academic freedom has many, often contradictory definitions (Kallerud 2006, 9), there are some common elements. Invoking academic freedom is often meant as a critique limiting or prescribing topics, methods, materials, etc. in academic research, teaching, and learning. However, while the freedom of research and teaching are frequently discussed, the freedom of learning receives less attention and remains vague (Kallerud 2006, 27). A distinction is

made between legitimate and illegitimate limitations (Kallerud 2006, 8). Academic freedom is mostly used in the context of higher education but has also been applied to schools, with the concession that it is less relevant here (Kallerud 2006, 21,22). Academic freedom is often seen as a thing of the past (Kallerud 2006, 24) because of tight administrative requirements of mass education and because of the growing complexity of research in terms of interdisciplinarity and the increasing necessity of research teams and networks. Recently, academic freedom has also been associated with the freedom of speech and been used as an argument against political correctness. There is disagreement about the question whether academic freedom solely denotes the absence of limitations for individuals or whether it also encompasses a collective dimension such as questions about institutional autonomy (state intervention and commercialization), centralization (such as centralizing curricula and standardizing learning targets), and prescription (e.g. of student progression).

Here I define academic freedom in a wide sense, arguing that the current loss of personal autonomy and the structural changes have a common underlying pattern establishing itself in the wake of neoliberal societal transformations leading to a homogenization of all aspects and fields of society and their instrumentalization by the capitalist economy. The instrumentalization of the field of education manifests itself in the trend to see students as customers, in labor market orientation (“Students are the new oil” as the Norwegian minister of education recently remarked (NSO 2018)), and result-orientation (in the form of detailed curricular learning goals replacing general knowledge and the common student question, “is this exam relevant?”). Freedom here either evaporates due to the alleged necessities of the marketplace such as standardization, quality control, and competition, or, in its customer orientation, mutates into an

infantile individualism demanding intellectual spoon-feeding, entertainment, and choice. Academic freedom does not serve the requirements of the marketplace and appears to be obsolete, a nostalgic glorification of the ivory tower. However, the problem of academic freedom is not its obsolescence but that it tends to adopt the neoliberal concept of freedom, marked by utilitarian individualism. For a critique of educational instrumentalization, a better definition of freedom is needed.

2. Hannah Arendt's "freedom to be free"

A concept of freedom suitable for challenging the instrumentalization of education is found in Hannah Arendt's (2018) essay "The Freedom to be Free," distinguishing between negative and positive freedom. Negative freedom means the absence of unjustified limitations (15), politically speaking that is the absence of despotic rule, as well as of fear and need (24, 26). In Arendt's model, negative freedoms are conditions for positive ones: "Only those who know the freedom from need can appreciate the freedom from fear in its full sense, and only those who are free from both, from fear and from need, are able to experience a passion for public freedom" (26, my translation). Existential threats isolate people, as their focus is individual survival, and Arendt points out that no revolution was ever started by the destitute (17). Arendt's notion that negative freedom is a condition for positive one today can be read today as a justification for the welfare state. But what are limitations of negative freedom in education? For researchers it means commissioned research, having no tenure, fear of formal and informal sanctions when publishing uncomfortable results, and interference of commercial interests. For teachers it means being overworked and underpaid, not being able to choose textbooks and other materials, having to prepare students for national exams, having no means to enforce discipline in the classroom, and having to follow

detailed curricula. For students a lack of negative freedom is seen in being disciplined by constant exams, by not being able to express their views, by high tuition and having to work, by study loans that turn longer studies or a year abroad into a financial problem, and by rigid rules for study progression. These limitations to negative freedom prevent the development of positive freedom. What is it?

While religion and philosophy stress the importance of being aware of one's mortality as a characteristic of humanity, for Arendt the idea of natality, of the fact that we are born, is the core of the human condition (37). Every birth is a new beginning in a historical continuum (35). Freedom then means to start something new, requiring an ability to act (37). Action then requires a political arena, the freedom to participate in public and political life (40). Arendt sees history as a sequence of revolutions (including the revolution that is implied in preventing a revolution (41)). In short, positive freedom is the ability to create something new, realized through participation in public and political life. Arendt mentions the American revolution as a successful act of creating something new through public participation. Her understanding of natality and its implications can be seen as a fusion of the Ancient Greek ideal of participation in the polis and the modern fascination for the new replacing the old; thus it is related to humanism. Arendt's notion of both negative and positive freedom is collective in nature, not in the sense of conformity but as a necessity seeing collective welfare and volition as a prerequisite for political action, realizing the promise of creativity in the human condition.

Arendt's positive freedom is revolutionary in the sense as it challenges both romantic freedom, which lingers on in Western culture, and the alleged inherent necessities of neoliberal ideology; it also changes the way of understanding freedom in education. Since romanticism,

freedom in the West has been infused with anti-social sentiment, as expressed in Henrik Ibsen's lines, "Up here on the Highlands is Freedom and God / Down there stumble the Others" (Ibsen) or in Ralph Waldo Emerson's dictum, "Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members," with endless repercussions in the form of solitary Hollywood heroes. Romantic freedom is negative, it refers to the absence of limits and control.

On the contemporary positive side, we find not freedom but a form of determinism, most notably expressed in Margaret Thatcher's TINA (There Is No Alternative). Dramatic economic and educational changes are presented as unavoidable and often passed without substantial debate globalization, austerity programs the dismantling of welfare state and university autonomy, institutional mergers, etc. Former academic self-governance of universities has been replaced by a bureaucratic regime answerable to central power in the name of efficiency and quality. Even the formerly descriptive vocabulary of political reform now comes with an unaccountable moral force: the descriptive term differentiation gave way to the moralistic terms inclusion and exclusion.

It is clear that romantic negative freedom is no match for economic determinism because it is rightly seen as escapism. Arendt's notion of negative freedom demands not ivory tower solitude but political access to education for Ibsen's "stumbling Others," and her positive freedom demands social participation. Positive freedom rejects a pre-formed identity and demands education to form a personality; it rejects inclusion and demands participation in defining the parameters of differentiation, of who is included into what. Positive freedom rejects the semantic colonization of education through an economic Taylorization of education: while the quality of a computer or a shaver

is rightly measured by its standardization and predictability, greatly enhanced by mechanized production, quality in education depends on human relations and is marked by challenge, debate, and unpredictability. The current structural reforms of education present themselves not only as devoid of an alternative but create a strawman out of traditional education to justify their reforms.

The economic imperative

As an exchange student in the USA in 1990, I discovered Dilbert cartoons, making caustic fun of management and marketing babble, of terms such as quality management. Having laughed at how a coffee stain on a document turns into a new logo, the Brown Ring of Quality, I was unenthusiastic when in 2003 a new core curriculum, *Kvalitetsreform* (quality reform), was introduced and was taken very seriously in teacher education programs. The problem with quality is that its economic meaning of standardization and predictability is the opposite of its academic meaning as originality and unpredictability (of both the research process and of teaching understood as human interaction). Whereas terms such as quality and inclusion appeared in the educational discourse, others disappeared, e.g. knowledge and differentiation. With objective knowledge disappears a common frame of reference, the question of “how do we want to live?” Rather than acquiring common knowledge and exercising to debate its application as an individual in a larger community, the preferred collective level today is the team, being skilled in practical problem solution. While it is debatable whether the replacement of shared knowledge and literature, the canon, actually serves the economy (it does not create strategically and historically minded leaders), seeing the instrumentalization of education as unavoidable is only possible if one accepts the parameters of the gospels of efficiency and practice. Instead, students should learn how the invocation of fate serves an

ideology, that There Always Is An Alternative, and that a future requires shared imaginaries developed in public debates also voicing individual dissent; in short, a future needs participation, not teamwork. Participation cannot be instrumental because instrumentality assumes common goals and short-circuits debate. This is why the Austrian philosopher Konrad Paul Liessmann turns around Seneca's phrase and demands that we should learn for school, not for life (2017, 27), where school is a protected space for experimenting with new ideas.

Instrumentality vs. authority?

Quality management and skills and competence orientation have met little resistance in many countries because they appeal to progressive pedagogues, promising to eliminate the authority of teachers by redefining their role as coaches and supervisors, eliminating truth and replacing it with situated knowledge, by demanding radical equality through inclusion. But is traditional education authoritarian? While authoritarian teaching was and is a reality on the ground, humanism is a contestation of it, not a justification. Von Humboldt defines education as "the connection of our ego with the world towards the most general, liveliest, and freest interaction" (2017, 7). The strawman of authoritarianism starts from the erroneous conflation of power distance and authoritarianism, in other words that accepting the key role of the teacher means to prescribe a mode of learning and understanding. The opposite is the case: the humanist ideal stresses the importance of the knowledgeable teacher, someone who can create a frame for the "freest interaction." Authoritarianism does not arise through objective knowledge or the privileged role of the teacher in the classroom, to the contrary: reducing the role of teachers to be curricular implementers and reducing objective knowledge to local problem solving through skills and competences leads to authoritarian

structures because learning is then based on unaccountable documents such as curricula and textbooks.

Is humanist education elitist? Wilhelm von Humboldt sees universal education as a core element of the humanist ideal:

There are undeniably certain kinds of knowledge that must be of a general nature and, more importantly, a certain cultivation of the mind and character that nobody can afford to be without. People obviously cannot be good craftworkers, merchants, soldiers or businessmen unless, regardless of their occupation, they are good, upstanding and - according to their condition - well-informed human beings and citizens. If this basis is laid through schooling, vocational skills are easily acquired later on, and a person is always free to move from one occupation to another, as so often happens in life. (quoted in Günther, 1988)

This position of differentiation of education with a common minimum standard can be read as elitist today from a position of radical inclusion; the alternative model is a differentiated system of education, with equal opportunities rather than equal outcomes.

Old battles, new frontlines

Looking at 19th century battles in education is instructive because it shows that traditional education fought similar battles for partially the same values. The philosopher and education expert Friedrich Paulsen points out that the foundation of the University of Berlin in 1810 was carried out in the spirit of academic freedom, realized as freedom of academic work, as excellence of its professors in their field rather than their teaching skills, and the ideal of learning not as acquisition of encyclopedic knowledge or dogmatic tenets but as self-guided understanding of science and the beginning participation in scientific work (115). While a school may be regulated by curricula, scientific

work cannot be regulated by state administration without losing its character (116). Paulsen notes the historical coincidence. While the University of Berlin is founded in the spirit of freedom in 1810, only two years earlier Napoleon followed the opposite principle: he treated faculties as independent and labor market-oriented institutions and provided them with detailed curricula. However, two generations later, the French gradually adopt the German system of freedom, which Paulsen interprets as a victory of freedom over regimentation (116).

Also primary schools enjoy the spirit of freedom, harvesting the fruits of the pedagogical reform movement of the late 18th century, of Pestalozzi's ideal to develop each human child to a spiritually and ethically free personality (Paulsen 148). The aim is, with Kant, to develop every human being into a rational being called to freedom and responsibility. However, there is also resistance to the reforms; while in the middle of the 19th century only East Elbian land barons and the Roman Church spoke out against reforms, at the beginning of the 20th century Paulsen sees a backlash against better general education due to opposition against the rise of social democracy but does not doubt that better general education is in the interest of the people, in particular in a situation where nations compete (163) and inner stability: a state that fears the Enlightenment will be haunted by it in its worst form (164).

Humanists have demanded to change the role of the teacher from school master who teaches reading and writing and the catechism to being a *Jugendbildner* (former of youth), opening access for the masses to participation in the intellectual and spiritual life of a nation (164-5). Current educational reforms abandon the demands for participation because they have a narrow understanding of freedom;

they also have radical conceptions of equality, authority, and knowledge, undermining the emancipatory function of education.

What can teachers and students do?

If one understands the reforms as a structural problem, it becomes clear that blaming the victims (“lazy students”) or increasing the “learning pressure” as it was called at my institute for some time, is counterproductive. Teachers can organize and protest (at my institute the demand that all campuses use the same reading list was dropped after protests); such protest and the demand for substantial participation are not trouble making but demonstrate the spirit of natality. Teachers can use their still existing freedom to interpret the curriculum and involve students into decision-making. Most important is the development of non-instrumental learning, in extra-curricular and voluntary activities; free and open tasks give students freedom of interpretation. In general, learning and teaching need rituals and play in the sense of Johan Huizinga’s theory of play. Huizinga (2015) points out that play is superfluous (8) and that play is an interlude from our daily life (9); it forms human bonds and is related to ritual and the sphere of the sacred (9).

Conclusion

In university, academic freedom has become an argument against economic instrumentalization and bureaucratic control of research and teaching. Could the concept of academic freedom be useful as an ideal for all levels of education, in the sense of Wilhelm von Humboldt: “Education is the linking of our ego with the world towards the most general, most active, and freest interaction”? Freedom here needs to be defined in Hannah Arendt’s double sense, the absence of existential need (“the freedom to be free”) and as participation in the transformation of one’s society, environment, and oneself. In this

transformative sense, freedom corresponds to humanist ideals: “The result of this formative process is a personality marked by a developed individuality and self-confident participation in one’s culture” (Liessmann). However, the process of free self-formation is being replaced by an over-determination, seen in curricular micro-management and in instrumental reduction; students are increasingly seen as a resource. Demanding more than symbolic participation, stressing the self-disciplined freedom of learning and teaching, easing the testing regime, and seeing teaching as a human relation are the first steps to challenge the legitimacy of over-determined plan pedagogy.

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