

Foundations of a New Academic Activism: Habermasian Democratization of the University

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By situating the university in its modern political context, the role and responsibility of higher education institutions in terms of a new academic activism may be discussed. The modern political context may be understood as secularized (Taylor, 2007; Bilgrami, 2016), multicultural (Gutmann, 1994), rife with historical and contemporary injustice (Sen, 2011), yet suffering from limited political participation (Arendt, 1958). The modern university also exists at the nexus of several trends, including globalization, the rise of the global knowledge economy, and increasingly populist forms of nationalism (Altbach, 2016). Given this context, what is the role and what are the responsibilities of the modern university in relation to a new academic activism?

Habermas (1970) suggests that the modern institution has become depoliticized due to its focus on the transmission and production of “technically exploitable knowledge,” (p. 2) taking up a role solely within the economic functions of society. This tendency to commercialization of education services, the commodification of knowledge and research, and the increasingly managerial style of administration, as a response to neo-liberal higher education policy and practice, has been widely recognized and much critiqued in higher education scholarship. It is this focus on productivity within the economic aspect of society which Habermas (1970) proposes has separated the university from the public sphere, thus depoliticising higher education. The alternative is a return to more traditional functions of the university, including transmission, interpretation, and development of sociocultural traditions and professional preparation of students alongside the formation of students’ political consciousness. Taking up

the political mantle, the university must reinsert itself within the public sphere through the action of democratization.

The democratization of the university is an action or process which “[aims] at creating... an institutional framework... to undo the interlocking of instruction and research with power and privilege inside and outside the university” (Habermas, 1970, p. 46). This process may be considered as foundational for a new academic activism responsive to our modern political context. Democratization of the university through participation and decision-making across university stakeholders affects instruction, research, and institutional responsibilities.

Instruction, for instance, must include critical reflection across disciplines in order to ensure critical professional practice in students’ future careers. In terms of research, the potential for research outcomes to be used for repression must be considered. Institutional responsibilities may include politically evaluating research that takes place external to higher education (e.g.: military or industrial research), influencing education policy, and ensuring technical knowledge is provided in forms accessible and understandable to the public as an intentional support for a participatory democracy (Habermas, 1970).

As citizens of an international academic community, a question remains of whether our response within the new academic activism, both as individuals and as a community, extends beyond our individual institutions or nation states. With increasingly international disciplinary communities and the global research regime, perhaps this is no longer a question but a necessity. As such, it would seem that in order to be effective, the democratization of any one institution or national system of higher education requires global participation and a space for listening and responding to global voices.

References

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