

Chapter 5: The religious belief in rationality, science and democracy

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I continue to harbour a special prejudice against those who, in adopting this approach [neo-Kantian projects] imagine an ideal speech situation in which everyone (everyone?) would make the same moral and cognitive judgments. There are no moral or cognitive judgments which are not mediated by our concepts, and it seems to me that even our most apparently abstract concepts are historical through and through.

Skinner 2009

In this chapter, I will argue that academic practice or disciplines understood as part of the Enlightenment ideals – here represented by Jürgen Habermas's communicative philosophy – must be contrasted with an understanding of ideals as normative regimes or imaginaries and how, then, academic practice must be reformulated as a historically and discursively based activity and set in the context of the late modern capitalistic society. I will focus attention on how the university as an institution is given a privileged position in society as a neutral provider of knowledge, expressed in the belief that technology and science will solve our fundamental problems, and as a democratic-moral corrective to the world outside – supposed to guarantee that political action is guided by knowledge, and that deeper and more encompassing scientific insights will provide a richer and truer picture of reality. The Enlightenment ideal, or understanding of modernity as a rationalizing process, has become one with Western, institutionalized science. I will discuss this problem complex by counterposing the image of modern academic institutions as a process of liberation through disciplinization and seen in light of our time's dogmas and fundamental beliefs: a free and open democratic polity, the free and just market economy and the autonomous pursuit of the truth called science (Wagner 1994). Common to these beliefs is a discourse of liberation which is tightly intertwined with a specific understanding of modernity.

These beliefs can be traced back to the pursuit of autonomy for scientific rituals and practices during the so-called scientific revolution, to the demand for self-determination in revolutions such as the French and American, and lastly, to the liberation of economic activities from the supervision and regulation of an absolutist and mercantilist state. One premise for a discourse connected to such an understanding of modernity is the construction of a subject capable of teleological

action, self-controlling and autonomous. A version of such a discourse is put forth by Jürgen Habermas.

Moral imaginaries

The understanding of academic practices, and the ideals springing out of it, could rather be seen as normative regimes or moral imaginaries. The concept of moral imaginaries contains a belief in ideals, principles and norms as historically based and discursive. They constitute and decide the boundaries for what it is possible to legitimize – controlling and regulating action, critique, decisions, deliberations, etc. The Western moral imaginary is for instance constituted by a series of historical events that have been especially central for the ethos of science, for instance the peace of Westphalia, the French and American revolutions, and the Holocaust (Sirnes & Øyen 2011). Ideas and norms are therefore not given, as in the classical rationalist approach, a form of independent existence as ideals and utopias, or as in the modified Habermasian variant, the status of regulative ideas. In such approaches there is a tendency towards an understanding of ideas as hypostatic. On the other hand, a concept of normative regimes will not reduce the normative level to superstructure, as is found in Marxist theory. The concept of moral imaginaries, or regimes, is related to Cornelius Castoriadis's concept (1987) of the social imaginary. This concept of moral imaginaries, however, must be understood in relation to how ideas constitute the limits of political and normative acts and expressions (Skinner 2009), and not only directed towards a semiotic and symbolic level in our understanding of the world. In this there is also a similarity to religion understood in a broad sense as a belief system: the idea of the Enlightenment as the historical realization of reason, the liberation of man and the equilibrium of the market form, together, a collective and social imaginary, overlapping on religion's function.

Even though ideas, ideals and norms may appear natural, they need to be placed in the context of anthropological analysis and a social analysis of modernity. The realization that we are not above or separated from an anthropological description of ourselves, through concepts such as myths, rituals, cultural patterns of action, etc., could lead to more comprehensive descriptions and understandings of the political and social relations we are part of. But if these relations are seen in light of an Enlightenment ideal and an understanding that everything is deliberately available through rationality, then the anthropological aspects to our political, social and economic organization will be obscured. The conceptual and normative framework this ideal constitutes lacks an analysis of the genealogy of discourse, and the manner in which a discourse based in an ideal of Enlightenment itself contributes to forming the individuals' understanding of themselves and the social world.

The understanding of academic practice needs to start with the actual social, cultural and political practices of human beings. The practices which made knowledge possible must be studied in relation to knowledge itself (Lillebø 2007). For example, academic freedom is seen by many as a fundamental and ahistorical right. But it is, rather, a privilege springing from certain socio-economic relations in European history, particularly in how strong forces in the aristocracy desired to protect their scientists from the Church during the Renaissance. At that time, the Church controlled the majority of intellectual life and it was important to have a counterforce (Feyerabend 2011). Today the situation is reversed.

The ideals of religious freedom and the Enlightenment

Characteristic of the modern project is the desire to remove superstition and false consciousness. In the modernistic Enlightenment ideal – understood as both the belief in science and rationality – the history of science is read as an evolution in which steadily greater and better cultural and technological advances are made. It entails a conception of a political organization which, in the end, rests on the question of belief and the meta-story that democratization is a cumulative enlightenment process with clear and transparent distinctions between the public and private, the religious and secular. This understanding of modernity and liberal democracy shares some important features with religion. At its root there lies the thought that everyone – even Islamic fundamentalists or war-mongering American presidents – shall admit the “non-coercive coercion of the better argument.” This belief alone is not problematic. The problem is rather that it presents itself as having a foundation in something universally human, ahistorical and precisely being a reaction to religious and existential approaches to the lifeworld – and thereby having a privileged epistemological position.

The faith in progress is not connected to a concept of God, but to the development of rationality. The modern project is built on an idea of the existence of a basis, which the truth rests upon, and which scientific methods can uncover. In Habermas, this basis is language and the development of steadily better approaches and procedures within each undifferentiated sphere of validity (Habermas 2004). Fundamental dimensions of experience within human existence are easily lost to view when the analysis of political processes is reduced to argumentation and rationality. Firstly, the Habermasian approach assumes that if we only know enough, we will also know what to do. But overall, there are other mechanisms – such as power interests, ideological structures of meaning, unconscious desires – which influence when decisions are made. Secondly, there is an assumption that one can always present things more true. The political and legal spheres have procedures for political formation of will which

have become intersubjective: normative correctness is those claims which can be defended with general or universal arguments. In this lies an assumption that one can always be in better agreement and that one can coordinate actions more right. With such an idea, there follows a belief that the abolition and neutralization of power structures is possible. Discourse is the medium through which conflicting normative validity claims can be thematized and treated productively towards settlement in a consensual way. Effectualization or realization of discourse happens through a public, or a publically critical testing of validity claims in which all are assumed to have equal participation in a public rationality. This discourse is endowed by the scientific production of knowledge and arguments. Academic practice is therefore assumed to be a central part of the public sphere and a medium through which an inclusive opinion- and will-formation occurs in a more institutionalized sense (Habermas 1996). Public rationality is simultaneously defined as independent of context and ahistorical.

This type of understanding of the political, with an underlying uniform principle of a public rationality, rests upon a series of problematic assumptions. As Raymond Geuss (1981) points out, it is absurd to equate pre-dynastic Egyptians, French serfs from the ninth century, and Yanomami Indians from the beginning of the twentieth century within the view that they act correctly in as much as they are following a norm, which in an ideal speech situation would lead to universal consensus. Firstly, it is assumed that a liberal democracy is something all rational, consensus-seeking individuals are in agreement on, under certain idealized conditions which Habermas terms “ideal speech situation”. This fits well with our own Western development. Here, the historical and cultural development becomes a series of stages which have all either brought about or anticipated our current political culmination: the liberal democracy. Secondly, politics are reduced to a certain region of society – the undifferentiated public sphere. Politics limit themselves to peaceful conversation and reasonable agreement, risking what the French philosopher Jacques Rancière (2005) points to as annulling the redundant subjects, reducing the people to a sum of social body parts and reducing political communities to a connection based on interests and rational desires. Thirdly, political processes are presented as rationalistic struggles over interests, in which individuals or groups are involved in conflicts that are defined by transparent parameters and rational arguments. This is built upon a legal philosophical fiction: the relations between political subjects are formed in an objective and comprehensible pattern, of transparency, and of the force of dialectic arguments. However, political plurality is not an autonomization of certain spheres, such as public rationality, but rather a variation of practices and publics which involve power relations, conflicts and irreconcilable interests.

The representation of indigenous peoples in the Western democratic institutions can be illustrative. Firstly, indigenous legal traditions are not recognized in the juridical system. These legal traditions are tied to myths, gender differences in which men have a privileged political position, and family hierarchies which cannot be translated into “egalitarian”, rights-based deliberative processes. Secondly, there is a naïve belief that those outside our deliberative institutions and judicial system must be represented. The judicial system and the understanding of the subject as an individual bearer of rights are also not capable of recognizing collective rights. For example, collectively owned land areas (such as indigenous territories) do not qualify for financial credit, and in several countries in South America, such as Peru, it is possible to expropriate these territories if they are not commercially developed. For example, the sustenance and provision of the poorest 2/3 of the world’s population is dependent on biological variation and local knowledge. This resource base is today threatened due to the patenting of poor people’s plants and crops by scientists and Western firms who maintain they are “innovations” they themselves have created. The collective accumulation of knowledge by generations of local farmers, healers and indigenous peoples is not recognized within capitalist-technological market thinking. The West’s post-industrial system with intellectual property rights forces onto the third world the WTO agreement, which concerns trade related intellectual property rights.¹¹ This dictate on intellectual property rights defines patents only as private property, never as collective rights. This means that all knowledge, all ideas, endeavors and habits which have appeared collectively – among village farmers, tribal peoples in the forests, or within local research collectives – are excluded. At the same time, intellectual property rights are recognized when knowledge or practice yields profit and capital accumulation, instead of meeting social needs (Shiva 2001). The common good is no longer acknowledged. In a Rawlsian pluralistic world, there exists no idea or ideals of “the good life” or “the good lives” – only liberal rights and the free market. Through reducing human knowledge to private property, the exchange of ideas is turned into theft and piracy.

A concept of a homogenous public rationality leads one in the direction of understanding politics as a moral and argumentatively technical field, where it is possible to attain a rational consensus through deliberation. This contributes to a depoliticization of social problems, making them the responsibility of professional politicians, experts, or bureaucrats to solve.¹² Separatist groups, political activists, those defined as “terrorists”, indigenous peoples and subjects who stand outside the

¹¹ (TRIPS – Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights).

¹² It can also be said that this form of formation of opinion allows only advisory and expository interventions in the public sphere, and not that which has been termed *parrhesia*, in which one engages power through informed critique, and thereby incurs personal risk or the accusation of being too radical.

current discursive regime of recognition will not be heard. It is public rationality that defines the political subject, and this concept contains an inherent assumption that humans manage to exchange rational reasoning. The subject which operates in a social field as a fellow citizen is constituted as a self-reflective actor, who not only clarifies and strives for their own interests, but also actively defines and critically reflects over their own and others' desires against a background of competing motives and evaluations. The subject is constituted as an ideal, detached from a diverse cultural sphere of identification.

We will see, however, that this Enlightenment ideal has shifted in its contact with, especially, the market's functioning, though the idea that politics has its rational redemption has been retained. This shift can be seen as the Enlightenment ideal of today having been reformulated, so that scientification has been oriented towards the manifestation of technical projects. Sending a spaceship to Mars or developing a missile defense system for example has, and has had, a greater import for the USA's political agenda than eradicating illiteracy or poverty (Wilke 2009). Here a rationalistic Enlightenment ideal would contribute to, and underpin, an idea that "the human" and the social can be improved by objectivizing reconstructions so prediction and control would be possible. The latent functions of our contemporary form of political organization and mode of production are difficult to thematize, since the rationalistic ideal gives our late modern capitalistic democracy characteristics which are thought to be necessary. Hence, an Enlightenment ideal, as seen in Habermas, does not just conceal patterns of dominance and elite structures. It also risks becoming a theoretical support for a specific political regime – the liberalistic democracy.

The liberal dogma

The image of us all living in a society marked by freedom and democracy plays, without doubt, a decisive role in the Western political self-image. It is expressed in everything from various countries' constitutions to more popularized forms of commercial media. A striking example is when the prime minister of Norway, Jens Stoltenberg, after the terrorist attack on the 22nd of July, 2011, proclaimed that "our answer is more democracy and openness". After the terror attacks in New York on the 11th of September, 2001, George W. Bush said: "freedom itself was attacked this morning". The Swedish sociologist, Michael Carleheden (2009), would even go as far as to claim that the image of democracy in modern secularized societies has overtaken religion as "the opiate of the masses". Academic practice has a constitutive and maintaining significance for this image. Within a rationalist Enlightenment ideal it is assumed that academic practice is a democratic institution, precisely suited to delivering rational argumentation, guiding political action on the basis of

knowledge, and holding a democratic-moral control function over society. From the ideal to reality, however, the road is long.

Late modern society is characterized by an extensive differentiation and specialization; different subsystems are separated, such as science, economy, law and politics. They are formed as special functional spheres and communication systems with accompanying demands for validity. Political intervention in the various subsystems demands knowledge on a given subsystem's specific function set. At the same time, these subsystems have rather a character of being systems in which knowledge can be seen as governing. This complexity is the primary reason why expertise is gaining increased political influence, not only through bureaucracy, but also in the execution of politics. Increasingly more areas are controlled by formal knowledge regimes, epistemic cultures and specialized communication codes (see Eriksen 2001, Luhmann 1992). At the same time as knowledge is institutionalized and demarcated as its own authority, it is forced to define its relationship to the rest of society, and with that appears a need for legitimation. Such legitimation acts as a democratic-moral corrective, finding expression in the ideal that knowledge should control and direct political decision-making.

This model is built on a positivistic scientific ideal which aims to obtain rational decisions on the basis of objective knowledge and is a form of "social engineering". The power of experts rests on neither citizenship nor representation, but on knowledge and the legitimation of a self-appointed scientific elite. This type of legitimation is based on the belief that social problems can be solved by accumulating empirical knowledge, and in the belief that the development of technology is a cumulative, uniform enlightenment project. In such cases, the rationalistic Enlightenment project will not provide an alternative, but rather risks underpinning and strengthening such displaced Enlightenment ideals as the belief in cumulative science and the attainment of technical projects. It does not, for instance, manage to formulate alternatives to a social imaginary which would not demand a high carbon footprint. In such a context, one can ask oneself whether academic practice, understood as an Enlightenment ideal, is not itself one of the constituting actors for overarching ideologies rather than a corrective to this system. Thinking, and its possible function as a corrective, is subordinated to the same economic-ideological paradigm that it is set the task to criticize. It must be seen in the context of the idea that the global capitalist economy has an unlimited capability to appropriate not just every attempt at new thinking, but also paradigms of knowledge and praxes that are not inherently subordinated to an economic-technological growth paradigm.

This can be seen in how universities are undergoing an encompassing adjustment to the market. Thinking is subordinated to the demand for so-called socially useful production of knowledge, teaching has become a commodity, etc. With this, the universities become education factories and corporate entities, with employed rather than elected leaders, a demand for the flow of students in which study points and feasibility are central, awards systems in which institutions are rewarded proportional to their publication rate, etc. The knowledge that is “produced” has value primarily in that it can be transferred to other undifferentiated spheres, be it the political-bureaucratic organizing of society or the development of new technologies and new products, thus being adapted to the meeting with state management and the market’s imperatives. Today’s invocation of academic ideas, such as “Bildung” and “public rationality” constitutes just as much a part of globalization’s ideological-economic driving force as do alternatives to it (Jegerstedt 2011).

The technocracy, in the meeting with market imperatives, has further delivered the idea that social advancement is reached through increased economic production. Academic practice shall be organized as a market, through decentralization, privatization, and intensive thinking, being collectively known as New Public Management. Profession-political, commercial and paradigmatic thinking will govern. The transformation of social relations into market relation is, equivalent to expert’s power, an attempt to solve certain of the governance problems which arise in complex societies. Control techniques such as goal setting, merit rewards and internal competition reflect this. These disciplinary fields are all constructed to control or form one or more limited aspects of the subject. Individualization can then be seen as a political control strategy (McRobbie 2009).

The effects of a capitalism which terminates all stabile relations between people and institutions are also clearly seen in academic practices. The new work environment is characterized by temporariness, risk, and “flexible” organization through, for example, the use of temporary employment in order to manage the continual reorganization in a shifting “information economy”. On a structural level, it can be seen to concern new disciplinary and control techniques and new forms of structural inequality and power relations. At the same time, the social and structural risks in this type of system are individualized, reduced to personal inadequacies and a-politicized. The solution lies in the management of the self where various management theories can provide us with the indefinable qualities which are decisive for the development of different skills and abilities to better fit into today’s structures of wage employment.

Who shall guard whom?

Precisely because the rationalistic tradition provides a shine of objectivity and creates expectations of rational, ahistorical and generally valid solutions to complex human problems, it is necessary to see it in a critical light. We all “know” that knowledge is more than the regurgitation of facts. However, because we “know” this, and because the academic practice endures an ongoing self-reflection, we are “free” to act within it and can legitimize it from a privileged epistemic position.¹³ It is precisely ideals, the critical self-reflection, the rhetorical drills that separate this practice from other spheres of will- and opinion-formation or structures where meaning is constituted, and it is also just such a conception which divides the modern society from the “pre-modern” cultures in which the individuals think along lines of which they are not conscious: they are subject to discursive mechanisms they do not reflect upon.

The idea of academia’s function as a channel for the public and free exchange of ideas through open and transparent argumentation, as an independent conveyer of knowledge, and as a control element over other differentiated spheres must be reformulated in light of a historical and discursive understanding. It is not ideas and ideals which are primary, but praxes as historical, discursive processes where one balances materialistic structures with cultural and normative regimes, individual expression with collective complexes. This means that one will not see the history of knowledge on a level of truth, but rather investigate which relations truth is constituted in.¹⁴ Thus, the academic practice and the associated ideals can be understood as a normative regime, as an ideological and cultural construction that manifests itself through a system of different institutions and intervenes in people’s lives through institutional networks, and as a product of society’s various historical, social and political processes. This means that the academic practice does not necessarily inhabit a privileged position as a democratic corrective, but should be monitored with the same suspicion as all other activities in society. Such control cannot satisfactorily occur through ongoing self-reflection or researchers guarding themselves, as in various centers and committees such as the Center for the Study

¹³ For example, in every number of the Norwegian Social Anthropologic Journal over the last eight years, there has been at least one article that explicitly treated one or more of the central scientific theoretical questions in the Western history of ideas: objectivity, generalization, representation, advocacy, etc. The rhetorical drills around method that every dissertation in sociology must include have an equivalent status: as long as science self-reflects on its methodological and scientific theoretical problems, it can choose to address that which separates it from other structures where meaning is constituted.

¹⁴ For example, the psychiatric evaluation, released in the fall of 2011, which declared the perpetrator of the 77 murders on the 22nd of July of that year in Oslo and on Utøya as “criminally insane”, has served to strangify, defamiliarize and historicize psychiatry as a scientific practice. The discussion since this report has been a reminder that knowledge does not arise in isolation, but rather exists in a social and cultural practice in which diagnoses must be interpreted just as much as concepts defining social position and normality at a given historical moment.

of the Sciences and the Humanities or The National Committee for Research Ethics in Science and Technology. This doesn't mean that Norwegian researchers should have anthropologists from the Third World come and study us. Neither does it mean that we need a variant of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. But it does mean that the privileged position which is ascribed academic practice in light of an idea on Enlightenment must not only be critically investigated. It must also be seen as a legitimization of the emergence of a hegemonic capitalist-technological growth paradigm where it feeds the political arena and market with a – rightfully enough, misrepresented – Enlightenment ideal. As such, the position of academic practice must be seen as part of one of the most imperative problems of the 21st century.

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