



More Than Welcome: A Berlin Call for University Ethics

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More Than Welcome: A Berlin Call for University Ethics

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The University and the Future of Democracy – Scholars at Risk 2018 Berlin

Abstract:

Democracy is under attack, as are human rights outside and inside the academy, and scholars are at risk. The keynote proposes an ethics that calls on universities to truly welcome these scholars, with more than a benevolent gesture. Instead, the university must be the space for a truly cosmopolitan “education” via exchange among equals – which adds Alexander and Caroline to Wilhelm von Humboldt. This allows an “enlightened and active mind ... to wander freely and widely”, as “one of the joys and rewards of human existence” – which is the version of the United Nations Committee on such human rights. This commitment to safeguard education and academic freedom justifies university autonomy; the way a university deals with scholars at risk is a litmus test of its practice, and its ability to contribute to democracy at all.

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At the 2018 Scholars at Risk conference in Berlin, keynotes have addressed academic freedom (Hoodfar) and open inquiry (Butler), social stability and sustainable development (Hilgert). On this last day, I want to address the institution that hosts scholars, that allows for, empowers and invests in research and teaching, that organizes education: the university. It is an institutional answer to the question of what needs to be done. And since I consider the political situation we live in worrying, it is also a Berlin call for university ethics.

Now: **Do you know Humboldt?**

There is a Berlin university that carries the name (and many others, on many continents). Yet the name refers to people: Familie Humboldt. Primarily, “Humboldt” is a reminder of **Wilhelm**, a Prussian bureaucrat who started what is now known as the Humboldt model of higher education, in Berlin in 1810.² It is based on the freedom to choose your course of studies, in a community of scholars and students, and free from economic or political pressure and limitations. Today, we call this academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

However, there is also **Alexander**, the geographer, naturalist and linguist, a foreseer of climate change, and author of *Kosmos*³. He did not only live

² R. D. Anderson, *Germany and the Humboldtian Model* 2004

³ in english: *Cosmos. Sketch for a Physical Description of the Universe*"



interdisciplinarity⁴, yet also live a cosmopolitan⁵. life, a gay man eventually countering colonial mindsets regarding the unknown, the other.

And there is **Caroline** - do never forget the women!⁶ She married Wilhelm, and - yet - led a liberated life. Like Alexander, she did not only travel, but went places to stay, and led a literary salon, the at the time legitimate format to stage debate, organize collective enquiry, contextualize knowledge.

In light of threats to academic freedom, and to democracy overall, I suggest to draw **inspiration from all three**. You need all three dimensions when you engage in and for the university, to allow for and contribute to democracy, in the future.

Wilhelm – to understand academic freedom and the university in its democratic function,

Alexander – to get the cosmopolitan nature of the task, to implement glocalisation in light of globalisation,

Caroline – to truly value the academy as a diverse space of exchange among equals.

⁴ See Cannon, Susan Faye. *Science in Culture: The Early Victorian Period*. Science History Publications. NY. 1978; Jardine, N; Secord, J.A.; Spary, E.C. *Cultures of Natural History*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, NY. 1996

⁵ In regard to the much debated topic of “global citizenship” in the U.S.A. cf. Kevin Hovland, *Shared Futures: Global Learning and Liberal Education*, 2006; also see Bode, I.c. The term cosmopolitan is used in varied ways by Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, who applies this (older) idea in terms of a philosophy of law; cf. *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose*, 1784; and which is also referred to by Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Ideas for an endeavour to define the limits of state action*, 1792, his brother Alexander experienced it on his travels and with *Cosmos*, his sister Caroline realised it during salon discussions (cf. Hazel Rosenstrauch, *Wahlverwandt und ebenbürtig. Caroline und Wilhelm von Humboldt*, 2009). Today, there are several versions of cosmopolitanism, incl. Kwame A. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a world of strangers*, 2006.

⁶ See Hazel Rosenstrauch: *Wahlverwandt und ebenbürtig. Caroline und Wilhelm von Humboldt*. Eichborn, Frankfurt/M 2009; Dagmar von Gersdorff: *Caroline von Humboldt. Eine Biographie*. Insel, Frankfurt/M 2011.



Why is this important today?

Universities are important because democracy is under attack, as are human rights and the institutional arrangements of the rule of law to protect them⁷. This keynote does not allow me to describe the details. But the strategically well planned attacks on democracy by populists, employing the more or less subtle means of autocratic legalism, as well as the outright destruction by means of sheer force do exist, and they are deeply worrying. Certainly, locations and contexts differ, as does the harm.⁸ And it happens outside of and inside the academy, and activists and journalists and judges, and more, as well as scholars and students are persecuted, threatened, jailed, even murdered. In fact , there are many pressing issues that need to be addressed.

Yet regarding scholars, it is of crucial importance to understand that democracy does in fact rely on universities, and on academic freedom, in specific ways. It is universities that have a specific role to play in allowing for and defending

⁷ What we see and read in the news and listen to is, in domestic and EU and global politics as well as in universities, in teaching and research and higher education, the attempt to claim the grand and noble terms of a consensus reached around the globe after 1945, and again after 1989, in order to destroy it. What we see is the attempt to claim a “true meaning” of democracy, the rule of law, of fundamental human rights, including free speech and academic freedom, to undermine its very meaning. To some, this is intellectually entertaining, another instance of hegemonic struggle, elites fighting for words, a system destroying itself. Some stubborn and flawed Marxists may even get excited about more trouble on the ground still hoping for a revolution. But this is either naïve or elitist. What we see is much more serious and dangerous than that. This is why I call on you: the organized attack on democracy, the rule of law, constitutionalism, and freedom of speech and academic freedom put all of us at risk.

⁸ Around the world, education is not in good shape. There are students at risk, or already hurt – like the girls abducted by Boko Haram and all the children turned into soldiers or gang members and all those starving instead of going to school – deprived of their human right to education. There are teachers at risk, or already fired, or threatened, or killed



democracy, and we need a deep sense of the university's global nature and need for equality in diversity to fill it.

So let me **first** address the **role of the university today**. The argument is that academic freedom and institutional autonomy are key, if properly understood, as requirements of Humboldt's version of education. As such, the university has a political function, as a factor of democracy.

Second, this freedom and this autonomy come with an **ethics**. Specifically, in an governance mode of modest realism, all universities have an international dimension today, which requires them to be diplomatic going abroad, and true hosts at home, willing and able to interact with the other as an equal.

Third, then, hosting scholars at risk is a **litmus test** for universities. They do only pass if they allow for, empower, and invest in different voices. Scholars at risk must enjoy more than a gracious gesture. Rather, they and their expertise must be truly welcome.

Overall, you may consider this, drawing inspiration from the Humboldt's, but also thinking at a place that went through dramatic changes in the world's history, a **Berlin call for university ethics**.

I. The role of the university today.

The starting point is that there is an inextricable link between the university and democracy.

Certainly, this link does only exist between democracy that deserves its name, and a university that lives up to an enlightened understanding of academic freedom and university autonomy. And this cannot be taken for granted at all.



Regarding democracy, there is an imminent and powerful **abuse of the label**. What Hungarian President Orbán has labelled “illiberal democracy” is not in need of academic freedom. Nor is a democracy that relies on tweeted news and denies the existence or relevance of facts in need of research. Rather, these representatives of what they still call democracy abuse the concept to destroy it. When politicians win majorities in elections proclaiming “illiberal democracy”, when law is denounced and courts are ridiculed, when constitutions are changed into a contradiction in terms, and when “truth” and “facts” and “arguments” become labels for lies, legends, or libel, echoed by powerful people in office and algorithms – we all have a serious problem.

Yet a democracy that is inextricably related to fundamental human rights, and thus, necessarily liberal, equality and dignity based – to refer to the grand consensus past 45 and past 89 –, and a democracy that safeguards this for each and everyone via the rule of law and a separation of powers, does allow for, and in fact need, the university.

However, this does only apply to a university that deserves the name. Regarding academic freedom and the university, there is a **similar risk** as the one that destroy democracy. Clearly, there are institutions that do not deserve the name. This is the case if a school offers biased or even oppressive training, rather than opportunities to think and articulate opinions. Yet other cases are much less clear. When universities become sites of lies instead of truth, of hate instead of speech, of ideology instead of explorative research and teaching,



they become sites of battle, or controversy, yet they are not engaged in what defines a university as such.

Namely, and rather prominent in the U.S., but also in other countries, there are speakers that claim a right to academic freedom, or a right to free speech in universities, in order to call the Holocaust a lie, or human races a fact, inherently unequal, or to lecture on women as beings naturally inferior to men, via brain size, or categorize sexual minorities as sick freaks and aberrations of nature, or present the belief in God's creation a science, and natural sciences as crap.

To avoid misunderstandings: all this can be said, and written, and communicated by other peaceful means as long as it does not harm someone. Whether we like it or not: this is free speech.

Yet if such lies or hate or ideology achieves to be defined as research and teaching, to enjoy academic freedom and the protection of an autonomous university, it is an **abuse of the very idea**.⁹ Lies – or alternative facts” - or hate or ideology is not just another approach and topic and result of research, but it is lies and hate and ideology. It may and must be subject to debate, but it is not research and teaching. Instead, these are attempts to capture the space of academic freedom, to in fact destroy it. Note that these people and organisations act based on well funded strategies, and are defended by many more, and attempt to enlist all liberals in that defence, in the name of the human right to free speech, to however denounce women and people of color

⁹ Note that in countries like the U.S., there is a temptation to confuse free speech with academic freedom, for lack of a more refined concept, to be found in international human rights law, or explicitly in German constitutional law.



and other others, as well as critical analysis. Based on the very concept of the university as a site of education, such attempts to rather destroy the university must be refuted.

This is **Wilhelm**.

To understand what the university is about, or should at least attempt to be, in an ever-lasting process of trying, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and this a Berlin idea, is inspiring. In 1810, he conceptualized the university as the place of “**Bildung**” - a term that carries a meaning beyond its usual translation as “higher education”, since it is a specific type of it: a development of mind and soul towards civic virtues via academic encounter. Famously, he explained to the king “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.” But notably, he saw this not only as economically profitable. To add another Humboldt scholar, educator and civil rights leader, W.E.B. DuBois: He stated in 1902 that “the ideals of education, whether men [sic] are taught to teach or plow, to weave or to write, must not be allowed to sink into sordid utilitarianism. Education must keep broad ideals before it, and never forget that it is dealing with Souls and not with Dollars.” Put this way, dealing with souls defines a university as very specific space.

Namely, Wilhelm promoted higher learning as an **asset of a democratic society**. Academic freedom of research and freedom of study¹⁰, in the

¹⁰ *Lernfreiheit*, instead of rigid curricula, still defining the difference between Ph.D. studies and a doctorate



community of scholars and students, in an institution that enjoys corporate autonomy despite their being funded by the state¹¹ - to allow for, empower and invest in citizens. There is the link between democracy and the university, if both deserve the name.

Based on this concept, as the **United Nations** phrase it now, higher education, in which teaching is grounded in and part of research, has “a vital role ... in promoting ... democracy”, beyond the practical, as a human right. Or, in the words of the organization of all states marked as European geographically, the Council of Europe, which runs a project on Education for Democratic Citizens since 1997, “challenges that Europe is facing today – including disenchantment with democracy, integration of refugees and the rise of violent extremism - make education for democratic citizenship and human rights more important than ever”¹², and we need to step up this work in the years to come.

Indeed, the **attacks themselves** are a **striking indicator** of why this is necessary: Wherever autocrats are out to destroy a democratic society, as a society that respects all present as equals, and limits majority power by fundamental rights eventually protected by courts, they do attack specific institutions and particular people first, namely: the media, courts, and the university and scholars. As such, what illustrates the nexus between the university and

¹¹ Similar to public broadcasting, state funding of truly autonomous research is a paradoxical and courageous move in that those in power fund those designed for critique.

¹² Commemoration of 20 years, at https://www.coe.int/en/web/edc/home/-/asset_publisher/MmQioA2qaHyO/content/twenty-years-of-promoting-education-for-democracy-and-human-rights?inheritRedirect=false. The Council develops a Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture, to support schools with such efforts. There is a continuous effort in the Council of Europe to strengthen such efforts, namely since 2002, including the **Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education from 2010**.



democracy is the relationship between pressure and threats on academics and critical thinking and the presence of non- or antidemocratic forces in any society. The more democracy is at risk, the less academic freedom. Scholars who oppose autocratic regimes and ideologies do report that they were not targeted for being somewhere at a time, but for being academics where critical thought is not wanted. This has happened in Turkey, and it also characterises the attacks on universities in Hungary or Poland, spiced with antisemitism and racism, with sexism and homophobia.

So there is an inherent link between the university and democracy. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are key, if properly understood, in Humboldt's version of education, to a democratic society. As such, the university has a political function, as a factor of democracy.

II. freedom and autonomy come with an ethics.

Academic freedom and university autonomy come with an **ethics**. In fact, such an ethics informs how a university deals with others, ranging from international partners to hosted scholars at risk.

Namely, freedom and university autonomy shall not be confused with unlimited use of privilege.¹³ This is an important addition, because there are not only attempts to abuse the very idea of education and academic freedom and the university as such, but there are also **radical misunderstandings**, or

¹³ Wilhelm von Humboldt believed that a university can and will achieve more (and also different things) than can ever be planned by the state. This also applies to plans made by presidents and rectors, 'professionalised deanships' and other executive committees: there is no such thing as orders, or thoroughly planned success. However, there is good academic governance.



misconceptions, of this freedom as such.¹⁴ There is no unrestricted freedom, or unlimited liberty, in any social setting. Therefore, freedom beyond egocentric autonomy, as a liberty that is socially embedded, and thus in a world in which we fundamentally accept each other, carries with it obligations. And whenever it comes to obligations that are attached to freedom, there is certainly the question whether such obligations are in fact a cover up for political intrusion or oppression or censorship or any other inadequate intervention. But different from these, the ethics of the university I want to address are the very foundation academic freedom and the autonomy of the university itself rest upon. Such ethical obligations do not put knowledge and understanding at risk. Rather, there is an ethics to academic freedom that is **vital to take the risk away** from the academy.

Certainly, this keynote also does not suffice to address all aspects of such an ethics. In the context of scholars at risk, it seems most important to address **its international dimension**, thus calling on the ethics of universities that are not at risk themselves but reach out to places where scholars are, and that act as host universities and allow scholars at risk elsewhere to stay. Thus, university ethics have at least two sides, as international institutions, reaching out via collaboration and cooperation, as well as inviting in, as receiving ones.

Mostly, internationalisation of universities have been managed as outreach efforts, sending students and scholars abroad, collaborating and cooperating with others in this world.

14 . They are neither new nor do they come from “the enemy”.



This is **Alexander**, and it is a wonderful idea: go travel, go explore.

Yet with Alexander, and with W.E.B. DuBois and so many others, it is also entirely clear that this can fail badly¹⁵, and that we **need an ethics** to avoid that, or properly address when it happens.

There are many **examples** for the challenge: In efforts to internationalize universities, conflicts arise, and have arisen, when a university contracts into partnership with an institution that dismisses scholars based on their political and philosophical views. Conflicts also arise when a university partners with institutions in political contexts in which the core civil and political human rights are not protected¹⁶. In addition, conflicts arise when cooperation is funded by people or entities that persistently violate human rights. So would you sign an agreement with an institution where religious freedom and homosexuality are denied or discouraged – and what would you do if a student or scholar faces repression while working and studying there?

More questions arise: Who sets out the definition of education, as well as academic freedom, abroad, and can an international partner ‘censor’ the curriculum or research? When China funds institutes abroad, and Western

¹⁵ I.e., Peter Scott wrote about the “ugly side to internationalisation” in The Guardian on 06.06.2011. This term describes “more (high-fee) international students” as the *cash cow* problem, “exotic partnerships which inevitably demand much travelling by senior managers”, or partnerships that involve the awarding of honorary doctorates. It is therefore problematic when the whole situation is referred to as a market, even though economic aspects must be considered. Furthermore, there is also the criticism that internationalisation strategies are nothing more than a superficial myth, false labelling or unsuccessful efforts.

¹⁶ In Yale, a prominent critic of cooperating with Singapore was philosopher Seyla Benhabib, <http://yaledailynews.com/blog/2011/05/18/benhabib-why-i-oppose-yale-in-singapore/>. In NYU, similar debates focus on Abu Dhabi, Zvika Krieger, online at <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/03/the-emir-of-nyu-john-sextons-abu-dhabi-debacle/273982/>. For additional examples, and more on the diplomatic university, see Baer, Susann, Unbounded academic freedom?



states fund institutes in China – who runs them, and where does censorship start? More generally, international cooperation already always poses the question of whether this is still a university endeavour that deserves its name. And when should you stand up and protest human rights to be infringed? Note that the ‘bad guys’ like nothing more than collaborating with the ‘good guys’, as it is an excellent way to restore their tarnished reputation, and an opportunity to wash their dirty laundry. By way of example: a German partner tends to ensure that academic freedom appears sparkling white. Therefore, Western universities are sought after, and bribed into cooperating with institutions that use rather than allow for, empower, and invest in science. Thus, reaching out to international partners, in an governance mode of modest realism¹⁷, international activities of universities need to **be diplomatic**.¹⁸

Regarding the other dimension of an international institution, the ethics of a university must make it a **really good host**. When reaching out across borders must employ all skills developed in diplomacy, to avoid the gunboats as long as possible but take a stand when needed, inviting in does also have an ethics to it. Internationalisation means glocalisation. And here comes **Caroline**.

Caroline adds diversity to the picture. Wilhelm designed the institution. Alexander travelled the world, a cultural diplomat. And Caroline invited people into her salons, to allow for, empower and invest in the fascinating diversity of

¹⁷ Baer, unbounded

¹⁸ Diplomacy has a long – and global – history. It is a tool in international relations, not the answer to the questions posed. It relies on people who converse in a shared language, to enable links to other regions of the world, to collect information, to create understanding. Diplomacy relies on ambassadors who are at ease with different cultures, environments and languages; curious and motivated, open and unselfish, tackling common causes for the greater good.



approaches, understandings, views. If outreach needs diplomacy, to be a host needs generosity, more than tolerance and respect for the other, but genuine curiosity and appreciation. Inviting people in means to seriously engage with the unfamiliar – a key ingredient of science.¹⁹ If universities want to be true hosts at home, they must be willing and able to interact with the other as an equal.

Now this is not a question of priorities and emphasis and choice. It is also more than a necessity in today's global economy of knowledge. Rather, the commitment to globalisation as glocalisation, in a diplomatic university that is a true host, is a component of academic freedom and university autonomy that deserve the name.

III. **hosting scholars at risk - a litmus test for universities.**

That much said, the way universities treat scholars at risk are a **litmus test**. A key to an office and a library card will not do, nor will one lunch and a weekend invitation.

Rather, glocalisation in universities must translate into research and teaching. The more universities live up to the ideal of the Humboldtian university, based on academic freedom and institutional autonomy, driven not by money or ideology, but by research, the more such institutions must host scholars from abroad as equals. Thus, if a university is based on a refined understanding of its function in and for democracy, it must allow for, empower, and invest in scholars at risk.

¹⁹ Nettelbeck, Joachim Nettelbeck, former Secretary of Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, FAZ on 19.03.2013, as quoted in Baer xxx



Scholars at risk must enjoy more than a gracious gesture. Globally thinking, their expertise must be truly welcome. Again, the ethics that inform academic freedom and university autonomy must also inform the university's international policies.

IV. Berlin call for university ethics

So this is, inspired by all three Humboldt's, but also thinking at a place that went through dramatic changes in the world's history, this is a **Berlin call for university ethics**.

With Humboldt and human rights, this is clearly a call from Berlin. It is deeply rooted in Berlin as a city – because this has been the geopolitical front of the cold war and the symbolic site of the Wall that came down – was taken down – in 1989. The call is also very Berlin because it is even more deeply anchored in a post-1945 consensus of “Never again” – to genocide, to antisemitism, to racism, to fascism in all forms, which were planned and executed and hailed ... in Berlin. And the call is so Berlin because it is indebted to the idea of the university as an autonomous community of scholars and students, free from state intrusion – attributed to Wilhelm - , yet committed to the Nomos, to world citizenship – Alexander - , and listening beyond prejudice – Caroline, all von Humboldt.

The key proposition is to counter the risk posed by attacks on democracy, and on universities and academic freedom.

Then, the call is for a nuanced diplomacy of a university reaching out.



Finally, the call is to, as one element of glocalisation, truly welcome and host scholars at risk, with more than a benevolent gesture. It is the university that is designed to be, and must strive to stay the space for a cosmopolitan “education” via exchange among equals – which adds, again, Alexander and Caroline to Wilhelm von Humboldt. The university then must be an inclusive space - diverse.²⁰ In the words of the United Nations Committee on such human rights, this allows an “enlightened and active mind ... to wander freely and widely”, as “one of the joys and rewards of human existence”.²¹

This commitment to safeguard education and academic freedom justifies university autonomy; the way a university deals with scholars at risk is a litmus test of its practice, and its ability to contribute to democracy at all. I encourage all of you to fight for it!

²⁰ Gailda Pitre Davis, *Diversity and Internationalization: Collaborating, Not Just Co-Existing*, 2013 (www.nafsa.org/_/File/_/ti_diversity.pdf); C.L. Olson, R. Evans, R.F. Shoenberg, *At home in the world: Bridging the gap between internationalization and multicultural education*, 2007

²¹ Well put by the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, in a document adopted in December 1999. Its work is based on the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI) of 16 December 1966, entry into force 3 January 1976, in accordance with article 27.