

Sustainable and responsible Academic Freedom¹

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Introduction

The subject of the conference held at Kharkiv University of Humanities “People’s Ukrainian Academy”, 15 February 2017 is “Educational risks: essence and approaches to solution”. In this paper I will address the issue of risk presented by threats towards academic freedom and how it can erode the social mission of university education and research. The case I present is ‘Responsible management’, closely tied to the ideology of sustainability that today has become a fashion at western business schools and even universities.

Academic freedom and academic responsibility

Academic freedom has been the basis of universities. According to the German tradition, it consists of *Lehrfreiheit*, i.e., freedom to teach the subject; *Lernfreiheit*, i.e., freedom to choose subject to study; and *Freiheit der Wissenschaft*, i.e., freedom to perform scientific research. It has four arguments for its existence (Andreescu, 2009): Academic freedom is necessary for the discovery and dissemination of truth; for democracy; for autonomous individuals; and for the dignity of academics. Academic freedom, expressed through autonomous dignified professors (Polanyi, 1947; Andreescu, 2009), will create themselves and their students into autonomous free individuals through *Bildung*, supporting democracy, where ideas are created and distributed independent of political forces supporting or repressing them, these ideas ultimately created by the strive to truth, based on the scientific ethos. The university is the organization that contains and defend the academic freedom of their professors and students, in the spirit of, for example Gerlach Adolf von Münchhausen, that built the University of Göttingen, that “...forbade the denunciation of teachers on the grounds of heresy” (Gibbs, 2016:177).

The academic freedom can, however, not be granted without the individual responsibility of the academics. Academic freedom could be claimed to be a duty of the teacher, implying that the teacher has the right to decide about research and teaching, but based on the responsibility of truth, i.e., being based on scientific methods and subject to criticism, and disinterestedness, i.e., not performing these acts out of self-interest (Andreescu, 2009).

These freedoms are put at risk today, and universities, and maybe especially business schools are subject to societal, material and ideological influence that put up a threat to turn them into Lysenkonian institutions, guided by political correctness and ideological fashion of society. My example of the Lysenkonian risk is selected from my academic subject of Business Studies, and is termed Responsible Management Education.

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Fads and ideologies in business administration

My subject, Business Studies, has been exposed to fashion and ideologies over the years. In the 1980's the shareholder model in corporate finance were established. As such, it is a theory of finance that assume that the corporation has the sole goal of maximizing the profit of a shareholder that has specific characteristics. It has, however, been established as a dominating, almost hegemonic theory, and therefor turned into an ideology that converts the assumptions into matter of facts. The theory has become a set of normative practices.

In the 90's the research of corporate governance developed and suddenly, in the beginning of 2000, a specific set of governance practises showed up in articles and debates as constituting 'good governance', which became the norms of governing corporations (Ponomareva & Ahlberg, 2016).

In the middle of 2000, driven mainly by societal political forces that turned into economic forces, a new research agenda appeared, loosely termed sustainability. Quickly, it turned into a dominant theme at universities. While being a perspective, it turned into norms and even further, into ideologies. One example of this is the Responsible Management Education initiative (PRME).

As part of UN Global Impact (<https://www.unglobalcompact.org/>) a group of business schools and academic institutions decided to organize what they termed Responsible Management Education. They have organized an initiative, termed 'The Principles for Responsible Management Education', PRME, where those that sign to become members express: "...their conviction that higher education institutions integrating universal values into curriculum and research can contribute to a more sustainable and inclusive global economy, and help build more prosperous societies." (<http://www.unprme.org/participation/index.php>)

PRME is an ideology created by the UN Global Compact, and expressed in PRMEs second principle concerning values: "We will incorporate into our academic activities, curricula, and organisational practices the values of global social responsibility as portrayed in international initiatives such as the United Nations Global Compact." In this principle the hegemonic ambition of the ideology is expressed, that the ideology of responsible management will impregnate the university.

In their principle 3, it is declared: "We will create educational frameworks, materials, processes and environments that enable effective learning experiences for responsible leadership." This indicate that the signing institutions will not respect the teaching freedom that belong to the teachers academic freedom, but force the university staff to teach according to the ideology of PRME.

PRME declares through their principle 4 that the ideology of PRME will impregnate and direct the institutions research: "We will engage in conceptual and empirical research that advances our understanding about the role, dynamics, and impact of corporations in the creation of sustainable social, environmental and economic value." The institution will promote and even direct the research through their ideology, thus reducing the academic freedom concerning research.

PRME is an ideology with ontological, epistemological and political claims of sustainability, supported by UN, and well fitted to values held in high esteem today. In a university implementing and defending academic freedom, it will be presented in teaching and explored

in research as one example of ideology that has become fashionable. It will be contrasted with other ideologies, such as the Friedman ideology of responsible management being that of producing profit, since it is immoral to engage in other activities, fulfilling other goals than the profit goal (Friedman, 2002).

It is, however, hard to imagine that the two ideologies, the ideology of academic freedom and the responsible management ideology, as expressed by membership on PRME, are compatible. If this conclusion is valid, who are the institutions that put academic freedom aside, to promote a fashionable modern ideology? Many prestigious business schools of Europe are members, such as Bocconi in Italy, University of St Gallen in Switzerland, Copenhagen Business School in Denmark, Hanken Business School in Finland, BI Norwegian Business School in Norway and Stockholm School of Economics in Sweden. In Ukraine, only two schools are participants, Kyiv Mohyla Business School and Lviv Business schools. In Russia there are four participants, among them Graduate School of Management, St Petersburg University. In Sweden, some of the prestigious, but not all, universities are members.

Responsible Management Education as an ideology of a university

PRME is one indication that universities, or at least business schools today are vulnerable for ideological influence, and even ideological acceptance. Ideological influence and acceptance hits on the academic freedom, thus reducing the lively exchange and tests of ideas. At the same time it reduces the Bildung of the teachers and the students since it, as being an ideology, indoctrinates students to embrace the principles of responsible management.

While the reduction of academic freedom by PRME is immediate, it also presents a long term threat on academic freedom. With the implementation of PRME, young academics, that could have a higher probability to accept these principles and not clearly see that it is an ideology tied to one moment in human history, will have higher acceptance of ideology implementation through university teaching and research. It create the risk of making academics accustomed to ideological intrusion and to accept ideologies as directors of academic teaching and research. The risk is that universities becomes instrument of indoctrination instead of island of free ideas and discussions. Today sustainability, tomorrow apartheid.

If it is such a clear attack on academic freedom, why has it been accepted? It could be due to pure material reasons, that especially business schools experience resource constraints, and find resources more easily if they adhere to the PRME ideology, i.e., they attract more students and money from corporations, government and voluntary and charity organizations, that are more attracted by fashionable ideologies than scientific knowledge (Andreescu, 2009). It could also be explained by the implementation of New Public Management in universities, making them more responsive to, and thereby more vulnerable to external influence (Marginson, 2009). Another explanation could be weak academic leadership, that is less impregnated by and oriented towards academic values, and are more vulnerable and inspired by present society. It also fits into the general development of de-professionalization, where standards of a profession, especially one that claims to have capacity to create truth, is less legitimate compared to the institutional isomorphism, following the political tides of society, as legitimized by post-modern perspectives attacks on the truth concept.

Defending academic freedom

With these continues attacks on academic freedom, here being exemplified through PRME, what can be done to defend academic freedom, and thereby scientific development and democracy? What methods do we have in order to safeguard academic freedom, to make it a sustainable and responsible academic practise? Three methods can be considered, the market idea of public debate, the hierarchy idea of government regulation, and the clan idea of the community of academics.

The public debate, to discuss the development openly and in public media, is probably only possible for a selected few. Remember that the administrative leaders of universities and business schools have decided to implement the ideology. A critical individual, employing the academic freedom to put forward ideas, would presumably being hit by organizational repression, and being forced to show loyalty to the employer and to not create anxiety at the university through question the grand strategy of responsible management. Thus, only highly prestigious professors or professors with independent resources could be expected to perform a public debate.

Regulation by the government would imply a central agency responsible for defending academic freedom. It would become an academic court that deems university actions to be within or outside the realm of academic freedom. While it could be a knight of academic freedom, being forced to define it in detail, it could run the risk of becoming the enemy of the freedom it is placed to defend. Thus, there is a risk that it becomes its own enemy, putting up limits that constitute reduction of academic freedom.

That leaves us with one instrument of safeguarding academic freedom, the clan principle, i.e., the community of academics. The academics are those that enjoy academic freedom, supported by society, not only the government, that realize that academic freedom is in the best interest of a developing society. It could be claimed that if academics cannot defend their basic rights of academic freedom, maybe they should not enjoy those rights. The ethos of academics is lost if they do not defend themselves as academics with the duty of academic freedom. Then they have lost the spirit of finding the truth through debate and criticism, as expressed by Enrico Fermi, cited in Polanyi, 1947:6453 "...to insure that no important line of attack is neglected."

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