THINKING ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Daantjie Oosthuizen Academic Freedom Lecture

Rhodes University, 31 October 2014

Vice-Chancellor, deans of the different faculties, colleagues, students,

Good evening and many thanks for the invitation to present this year's Daantjie Oosthuizen's academic freedom lecture. For me this is an unexpected honour and a formidable challenge that I am not sure I will meet to my or your entire satisfaction. The name of Daantjie Oosthuizen evokes two important elements in thinking the university as institution: its critical capability and responsibility, and the role of philosophy departments in the critical examination of what universities and academics do; two topics that are as intellectually compelling as they are politically urgent. As if these two features were not enough allure to take my intellectual self out of my managerial shell, Daantjie Oosthuizen' s biography, his own philosophical and political choices have renewed appeal to an accidental Free Stater like myself. In the central region of the country the struggle for the university requires that we deepen our understanding of progressive and free thinking Afrikaner academics. On this score I have yet another reason to thank you for your invitation.

After I got over the deluded moment that allowed me to say yes, I did what any self-respecting academic in the 21st century does. I Googled "academic freedom". This produced 18 600 000 entries in less than a minute. Google books provided 1 700 000 entries in 0.57 seconds and Google scholar threw an astounding 2 560 000 entries in four seconds. There can be little doubt that academic freedom is an issue that keeps on worrying us; but given this abundance, can there be anything left to be said about academic freedom?

Naturally not content with this kind of google search I looked for the list of TB Davies and Oosthuizen lectures available on the internet. Besides the list of illustrious local and international names, I found that lectures on academic freedom can be grouped into five sets of problematiques: a) lectures focused on the conceptual and political history of academic freedom and its struggles locally and internationally; b) lectures focused on the critique of the consequences of neo-liberalism on academia and its local manifestations; these include reflections on post 9/11 notions of academic freedom; c) direct critiques of the South African government's increasing interference in higher education; d) critiques of current conceptualisations of academic freedom characterised by the absence or disregard of concrete social and epistemological actors, these include feminist and postcolonial critiques; and e) critiques of academic freedom in relation to the responsibility of the intellectual.

My intention tonight is, if at all possible, to propose a different point of entry into the topic. What I am going to propose is a direct consequence of my own struggle as university manager and as intellectual to find a point at which in my own praxis I could bring together an anti-managerialist and anti-authoritarian conviction together with a deep sense of the social responsibility that being an academic entails.

Because this is an intellectual, moral and political battle inside myself, what I am offering to you is a thought experiment, which I know still requires further wrestling with concepts and practices. I hope you will take this in the spirit in which it is offered, as a conversation in the Republic of Letters whose boundaries have become interestingly porous.

I have titled this lecture *Thinking Academic Freedom,* because I would like to make thinking in the Arendtian sense the axis along which to organise this exposition. It was interesting for me that when I sent the title of the lecture I was asked whether I meant thinking or rethinking. It is true that we tend to rethink, revisit and review in the titles of our lectures and papers. This usually means that the accent is not so much on the act of thinking but on the object we are trying to examine. For this occasion, I would like to make the act of thinking itself as important an aspect of the lecture as the issue of academic freedom itself. What interests me is to explore the nature of our work as academics and how this relates to the notion of academic freedom.

So, this is my proposed itinerary: I will first stop to flag some of the issues we all know about, current debates on academic freedom which inevitably constitute one layer of the background for these reflections; then I would like to explore with the lens of Hannah Arendt's political thinking the meaning of freedom and thinking in relation to the life of academics. I will then complicate matters further by jumping from Arendt to Pierre Bourdieu's *Homo Academicus*, after which I hope to land in the not too comfortable terrain of a call to action.

The political economy of knowledge production

In this first section of the lecture I would like to run through the familiar catalogue of academic miseries that are usually enumerated as consequences of the rise of the knowledge economy and the introduction of new and stronger forms of accountability between universities, the state and society. My point here is twofold. On the one hand, I want to make it clear that I have not changed my view about the negative effects that higher education reform in the context of global socio-economic trends has had for the university in general and for academics in particular. On the other hand, I want to push my own position further and argue that the politicisation and instrumentalisation of the university that derives from these processes has as its interesting contradictory result the depolicisation of knowledge and of the academic as individual. This depoliticisation has infected our fight for academic freedom and turned it into a right to disengage not only from the political fight around these issues, but more worryingly, from the deliberation about knowledge – its constitution, effects , distribution in society and its power. The result of this is that we are abdicating our moral responsibility to the university and to ourselves as intellectuals.

Bear with me as I lay out the arguments.

The rise of the knowledge economy has changed both the definitions of knowledge fields and the modalities of knowledge production. This, as Henkel and Marginson have shown, has had an undeniable impact on the exercise of academic freedom and on academics' definition of their professional identities (Henkel 2005; 2007 and Marginson 2008; 2009).

The introduction of greater accountability at higher education institutions (HEIs) came hand-in-hand with the external imposition of new forms of control and measurement of productivity and efficiency that increased the regulation of academic life. The impact of these processes was felt especially in the institutional reorganisation of knowledge (merger, fusion and the closing down of departments and programmes), the structure of the curriculum (the reorientation of many programmes to respond directly to market needs) and the funding of research (the prioritisation of research areas in relation to new definitions and measures of impact and relevance).

I have argued in another paper that the rise of the knowledge economy and of new forms of accountability at universities create prescribed paths for professional academics and that these paths move academics further away from the fulfilment of their potential role as intellectuals, that is as a person who, besides academic expertise in a particular field, also has the capacity, as Said aptly put it, to represent and articulate a view to and for a public (Said, 1994:9). Let me correct my own idealism here by reminding ourselves that well before neo-liberalism and managerialism raised their ugly heads not every academic was a public intellectual; not every academic was even engaged with what happened inside the university. It is true, however, that under the current pressure to count and measure (professional) academics are even less inclined to participate in university debates and activities that take them away from the "rating" path or enter into public debate about matters that concern society when these activities are not sufficiently valued or, worse, are frowned upon by those keeping the score of how many publications where have been produced.

The choice to follow the prescribed path because of timidity in relation to the powers that be, or because it constitutes the line of least resistance, compared to, for example, public engagement, weakens the role of the university in the development of democracy and isolates academics as individuals from important public debates.

As if these were not sufficient, in the last thirty years knowledge of the university has made its appearance as a field of study with two variations, one academic, the other, for lack of a better word, I would call bureaucratic. In its academic version, this knowledge focuses on the core functions of the university and it is used for the purpose of monitoring performance but also, and more importantly, to understand problems in and of the university. The epistemological basis of this knowledge is complex and resides in a variety of academic disciplines and therefore is not independent from disciplinary theoretical and methodological debates. It is accepted that the validity of this knowledge has to be open to question and that therefore knowledge of the university has to become simultaneously more reliable and more tentative and cautious about the processes about which it is trying to give account.

It seems to me that, in South Africa as much as in the UK, knowledge of the university has often been perceived by academics as not a real part of the knowledge with which universities should be preoccupied. This knowledge is often regarded as alien, epistemologically suspect, and incapable (in its worst manifestations) of providing any understanding of what it is to be a university, or what is like to teach or research in the different disciplines.

This conceptualisation or misconception of institutional knowledge, in turn, created greater distance between embattled academics and management teams perceived as not only managerialist, but, in some cases at least, also as philistine in relation to the value and purpose of a university education.

All these changes have different manifestations in different academic disciplines. In disciplinary areas like the humanities or the pure sciences, less able to attract state funding and more questioned in terms of their contribution to the proverbial knowledge economy, this has generated, to various degrees, a depressive lack of purpose, or, worse, an attempt at a repurposing of the disciplines that alienates academics and deadens generation after generation of university graduates. But this feeling is not exclusive to disciplines regarded as endangered.

Against this complex backdrop, it is unsurprising that various levels of frustration have been felt by academics over the last two decades and that many have raised dissenting voices. More often than not academics' dissent is the expression of the intellectual and political reservations they have about the manner in which the tensions between power and knowledge, politics and truth, and action and thought are being solved by governments and by top management at many higher education institutions. Interventions in Senate meetings, open critique in the public media by individual academics and their associations have often denounced the orientation and consequences of government policy frameworks and university managements' interpretation of policy. Our country offers interesting examples of vibrant argumentative Senates.

And yet sometimes, the reaction has been simply a sense of dejection, either because in some cases the power of the perceived managerial tide is simply felt too great to oppose; or because the transformative project is seen as robbing groups of academics of their sense of self and of a universe in which they operated unchallenged. Of course there is no moral equivalence in these positions. The latter one is not only morally untenable but, often also, intellectually bankrupt. Yet, despite their dissimilar origins dejection often results in a depressing and depressed silence as academics roll over and mutter in the corners about how much longer they have until retirement. Of course, this is not the whole picture and it varies from university to university.

Luckily there are also academics who have managed to exercise in their personal capacity what Simon Marginson calls, following Amartya Sen, a radical critical break that enables them to both comply with the demands of bureaucratised knowledge and to break with it.

The alienation of the academic and the growing lack of interest in the academic profession as a life choice are probably among the most serious consequences of the ascent of bureaucratised knowledge and the marketisation of higher education. Yet, as I have argued elsewhere, this is only one possible narrative. Between the hankerings after a past that never was and the complete rejection of the new modes of knowing the university that have emerged in the last three decades

there is another possible path to traverse. Now, I do not believe that the only way of dealing with this is reversing the time machine. Neither do I believe that the solution lies with every academic taking on in a personal capacity the latest government or management dictum as if this were an individual battle. I do not think it is productive either to use our current framing of academic freedom as a permission to disengage in the sense that, after all and still to a fairly large extent, in my classroom I teach what I want and in my research I investigate what I like.

To enter this different path I am proposing that we need to retrace our steps to find how we redefine the terms of engagement so that academics participate in the deliberation about different types of knowledge about the university and enter into a space of self-reflection that both pre-empts and debunks politically and intellectually the bean counting tendency of some managers.

I think that there are positive actions that can be tried and I believe this shift is an urgent one because the work of confronting publicly and countering the bureaucratisation of universities and the instrumentalisation of knowledge can only be done with academics. Yet, for this to happen we need to examine our current notion of academic freedom and how it frames our work as academics. Laying the ground for this reflection is the purpose of the rest of this lecture.

Thinking and politics in an Arendtian key

Henkel has argued that the set of reforms that followed the rise of the evaluative state has resulted in a fuller inclusion of universities into the polity. That is, that the proverbial distance between university and society and, especially, between the university and the political realm, were shortened by the implementation of policy frameworks that redefined the role of the university in relation to the achievement of national goals.

What does the academy offer as a response to this, in many instances, devastating tide of change? A liberal tradition of academic freedom that only sees fault with what happens outside academia. The complexity of the syndrome of the academic under siege varies not only from university to university but also within universities. History, institutional cultures, intellectual traditions make a single diagnosis impossible. Our liberal tradition of academic freedom cannot help us to deal with this. Please, do not get me wrong, I am not saying that I do not believe that we have a right to decide what to teach and who to teach; I am not saying that we do not have the right to pursue our views and the search for truth unencumbered by external pressures. Neither am I saying that we do not have a right to strong opinions about the manner in which our institutions are managed and governed. On the contrary, we need all of this. What I am saying is that this is not enough. I am saying that our conceptualisation of academic freedom can be enriched if thought politically, that is, if we think academic freedom outside liberalism as a political philosophy.

As Calhoun has aptly put it, liberalism has always been a theory of the limits of politics as well as of political rights. What I am proposing here is to explore not the limits of politics, but on the contrary, its possibilities. I want to take us to an intellectual space in which refusal to participate is not possible. Not because, in a sort of authoritarian fashion, there is no alternative, but because

disengagement would be inimical to our vocation as academics and intellectuals. In order to construct my argument in this regard I am going to rely heavily on Hannah Arendt.

One of the Second World War German Jewish intellectuals exiled in the US, a disciple of Heidegger who wrote against his philosophy, and one of the most creative and polemic voices in the political thinking of the 20th century, Arendt devoted her life to the exploration of the relationship between thinking and morality and in the process tackled some of the crucial constitutive elements of political life and therefore, of human life. The exploration of Arendt's work that I am proposing starts with her understanding of freedom.

For Arendt freedom does not arise in relation to the process of thinking, since, she says, the dialogue between me and myself cannot be subject to either freedom or its absence. While my thinking has no outer manifestation it is politically irrelevant. It is precisely the fact that freedom is freedom to act in public that constitutes this principle of human existence into a political problem, and not into a philosophical one.

I would like to stay with this notion for a moment as I see in this the seed for a way of thinking our academic freedom differently.

Freedom is then an individual capacity that takes place among the many and it takes place when the individual utters a view publicly and enters into dialogue with others publicly. Unlike Habermas, for Arendt the public arena is not a precondition for deliberation, but the public space is constituted through action and deliberation, that is through politics. Freedom, then, in Arendt's terms, is freedom to act, it is freedom to propose new beginnings; it is freedom to change. In this sense freedom as action in public requires courage, which here means the determination of putting the preoccupation for the world before the preoccupation for the individual life in terms of the direction of our actions. Strangely then, or maybe not, freedom is not so much about the individual but about the community of equals within which the individual exists as a political being.

It is not difficult to take this notion of freedom as action in public to look at our academic life. After all the very profession involved in the professoriate is by definition public and takes place in public dialogue with both colleagues and students. As much as thinking keeps on being a solitary dialogue between me and myself and in this sense part of the vita contemplativa, academic life is a space of plurality, it has its agonic moments and it is certainly often a process of disclosure of the self through speech, whatever its material manifestation from the classroom to the internet.

Given the very role of knowledge in the constitution of the common world it seems unnatural, or at least incomplete to think the task of the academic as concluded in respect to the inner contemplation of disciplinary problems. Arendt distinguishes between thinking and knowing as two different intellectual operations with only thinking producing meaning and therefore understanding. While both activities are a necessary part of the intellectual life, it is thinking and the understanding that derives from it that is at the very origin of political action and judgement. The public character of politics/action does not require a recognition of a public good, as it would in Habermas, but it is based on the presentation of different perspectives and on the possibility of modifying other people's opinions on particular matters.

While I understand the temptation under our current circumstances to opt out, I cannot agree with this. I think the problem needs, as I have already indicated, a more careful analysis to unpack its intellectual and political layers. What we need is not to opt out but to stay and resist. I would like to argue, once again following Arendt, that the very nature of the intellectual work is precisely engagement with the world and that, it is therefore fundamentally political and does not admit disengagement either from the world or from itself.

If our intellectual life is not only a matter of increasing our knowledge of the natural and social world and the porous boundaries between the two, but also is about our capacity to make meaning of it, to understand it and to be able to act according to that understanding, and therefore to judge and communicate judgement we cannot escape the conditions of our worldliness. Neither can we escape the need for the internal critique of our own position as intellectuals.

And here is where we are joined in the argument by Pierre Bourdieu's incisive analysis of the academia. *Homo Academicus* is an ethnography of the French academy in the context of 1968 events but it is much more than that, it is the turning of the sociological gaze to an exploration of the intellectual field; it is a committed reflection as to the possibilities and potential of social science to objectivise itself and it is a call for the intellectual courage to make one's own intellectual practice the object of investigation.

For the purpose of the argument I am laying out what interests me in Bourdieu's work, that is, the call for scientific reason to challenge itself and establish the mechanisms that govern the intellectual world and, in particular, the relationships between the academic discourses and the position of the academics in the university and in society. For Bourdieu this understanding should help intellectual practice by teaching academics, and I quote:

"to place his responsibilities where his liberties are really situated and resolutely to refuse the infinitesimal acts of cowardice and laxness which leave the power of social necessity intact, to fight in himself and others the opportunistic indifference or conformist ennui which allow the social milieu to impose the slippery slope of resigned compliance and submissive complicity."

Let me repeat and rephrase, it is in our liberties as academics where our responsibilities are located. These liberties are simultaneously exercised in relation to our academic practice and in relation to the society at large.

It is precisely in the public engagement with the common world, in the fierce debate of the kind of world in which we want to live in and that we want to leave in trust to the new generations that we have to exercise our academic freedom and our responsibility as intellectuals.

Under the present circumstances both in the country and in the world our fight for academic freedom has to be simultaneously a resistance to the instrumentalisation of knowledge and a fundamental assertion of our capacity for political action as academics and this includes the refusal to do and comply with certain things. This does not imply that every academic has to become a public intellectual; neither does it imply that Renaissance poetry for example should be off bounds of the approved intellectual pursuit. What it implies is an active affirmation of our teaching as part of the construction of a public space; it implies the willingness to objectify our practices and think about what we do to actively, critically and systematically defy the instrumentalisation of our

courses and our research. It implies turning Senates, faculty boards, departmental meetings into occasions to build and offer a counter narrative of the higher education system but also a counter narrative of politics as a human activity shaped by thinking and judging. In our thinking as intellectuals, in the sense that this coupling of Arendt and Bourdieu offers, resides our fundamental, inalienable autonomy.

It is because of this, that against a notion of academic freedom that establishes the limits of the political in order to defend the university from the onslaught of the market and the political economy of innovation, I prefer to propose the exercise of academic freedom as the most political, public and plural exercise of thinking, the one that defines who we are as academics.

I thank you.

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