Political Role of Universities: Is it Necessary?

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On March 21, 2018, a public debate was organised by Charles University's Centre for Philosophy, Ethics and Religion to discuss the political role of universities. Three speakers were present, each demonstrating similar opinions on the role of universities in the political sphere. Universities are ambivalent in their nature, successful in their growing appeal to more students each year and yet they are often still undermined by the public sphere. The discussion emphasised how in a time of polarisation, new political challenges in society would undoubtedly affect how universities operate.

Vice-Chancellor of the Oxford University, Professor Louise Richardson, Stefan Collini, a Professor of Intellectual History and English Literature at Cambridge University, and Tomáš Halík, Professor of Sociology at Charles University were all present. Each demonstrating different experiences to suggest their specific view points for the role of universities in the public sphere, whether political or not.

Broadly speaking, Louise Richardson highlighted her experiences as a high-ranking university official during both the Scottish referendum and the EU referendum as a cause of conflict with the political sphere as well as acknowledging that the growing educational divides put universities in an uncomfortable position. Professor Stefan Collini, as the author of 'What are Universities for?' and a contributor to other public debates on the role of universities around Britain, stated his reasoning for why universities should remain public bodies separate from the political sphere. Final speaker Tomáš Halík, as an advocate for political freedoms demonstrated through his demonization by the Communist regime as 'an enemy of the regime' whilst teaching at Charles University in the 1970s, was more radical in his approach to what he deemed the 'nurture of democracy'.

Initially, the opening statements outlined the main arguments of the three speakers. Due to the length of the three speeches, the end discussion was limited but still successful in answering several questions from the audience.

Firstly, Collini's opening statement largely focused on how the university system should remain focused on education and therefore not have a political role. However, because of this commitment to education universities are affected by their surroundings and hence through this education they may cause students to engage more successfully in the public sphere. Yet, student organisations should remain separate from the university, and student-led activism is not 'puppet-mastered'. The open-ended enquiry within the university structure can cause scrutiny over government policy, but this should not entail a hostile relationship. Therefore, universities are 'partisans for truth, not for party'. This is also demonstrated through the temporary nature of government in democracies, and hence the universities' power will outspan a government. Yet, universities should not have a starring political role; they should remain in the background as educators and remember that 'free speech does not give freedom to cause direct harm to others.'

Louise Richardson pointed out how in an idealistic world there would be no political role for universities. However, unfortunately, they have always been drawn into the political fray due to being, at least partly, state funded. Largely focusing on the historical nature of universities and briefly discussing the historic relationship with the state, from Thomas Cromwell's purge of university scholars, to the closure of all Czech universities teaching in Czech language in 1939, Richardson demonstrated how the growing educational divide in countries can cause fear over how they are run. This was illustrated by using the statistic that 75% of 'remainers' in the Brexit vote had a post-secondary degree and that education was more relevant than class, age or race. As the previous Vice-Chancellor of St Andrews University during the Scottish Referendum and Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University during the EU Referendum, Richardson was very self-aware of how universities can be drawn into the political sphere. Her own experiences underlined how the responsibility of universities should be to remain a platform for individuals to debate, but continue to be a neutral space for this discussion to take place. However, in the case of the EU referendum, Oxford University did express that to Remain in the EU was in the best interests of the university.

Contrastingly to the other speakers, Tomáš Halík focused his argument on the threat of universities being ruled by political powers. He metaphorically described universities as an immune system being weakened by the political threat of populism. Halík reiterated how totalitarian power and the rise of populism is based on fear and is a dangerous phenomenon that should cause universities to prepare for conflict, as saviours of critical thinking. Using the example of the Central European University (CEU) in Hungary, Halík highlighted how the right-leaning government's threats to close the university were a danger to liberal values. Just the week previously Hungarians took to the streets to protest the changes to higher-education laws in the country. The situation remains unresolved. Drawing from his own experiences with the Communist regime, Halík stressed how universities should make platforms for competent students and staff to debate as part of being responsible citizens, and how this will act as a commitment to the constant nurture of democracy.

The discussion addressed a variety of questions from free speech to student revolutions. In general, questions focused on what a university's role should be, not just in a political sense. Do universities have a responsibility to teach civic values? All speakers agreed that it was not universities' prime function to teach civic responsibility as they are not accountable for their students; yet, through the education process, acquiring a sense of values such as engagement, reason and questioning happen almost by osmosis of studying at university.

If you are interested in accessing any of the other questions discussed at the forum, the event was recorded and is available to access on the website of Charles University's Faculty of Arts. There is the intention of a new tradition being formed with discussions on challenges facing society in the modern age to be held three times a year. If you want to be more involved in the movement, attend the next event in autumn, or use the hashtag #politicaluniversities.

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