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The continuing relevance of academic freedom*

A seminar on the theme "Academic Freedom and Contemporary Philippine Reality" cannot evade politically sensitive issues; otherwise academic freedom will just be, in the words of Angela Davis, "an empty concept which professors use to guarantee their right to work undisturbed by the real world, undisturbed by the real problems of society."

My paper this afternoon focuses on only one aspect of academic freedom – i.e., institutional autonomy or the independence of the university from the centers of wealth and power. The technocratization of Philippine society and its educational institutions has made it an issue of urgent concern to academics and academic administrators alike. It puts at stake the integrity of our institutions of higher learning and, unless their integrity is restored and safeguarded, we cannot speak of the "continuing relevance of academic freedom."

When universities appeared in the 11th and 12th centuries, first in Italy and then in England and France, they were tied-up with the monastic orders and, for their material needs, relied heavily on the patronage of kings and bishops. But once it became apparent that the purpose of their patrons often conflicted with the norms of scholarship, the struggle for academic autonomy began. It was then that the ivory tower became a favorite metaphor to represent the ideal academic community.

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The vanguard of this movement for institutional autonomy was the cathedral school of Notre Dame de Paris. It was the first academic institution to fight for a charter of rights and privileges, among which was the exclusive right to issue teachers' licenses so that the university teachers would be free from the fickle patronage of the bishop. Refusing to accept any external authority over the conduct of scholarship, teachers governed themselves by a system that resembled what we now call participatory democracy.

Paris became the model for most European universities: an autonomous, self-governing community of scholars wherein all regular members were directly involved in the making of academic policies. As these universities grew in size and the number of specialized disciplines multiplied, internal democracy was gradually eroded, giving rise to bureaucratic structure. The loosening of the communal ties that once held scholars together, a necessary consequence of bureaucratization, left the universities wide open to the coercive and corrupting pressures from national governments and national churches that were then in the process of consolidating state power.

The 18th century witnessed the total degeneration of the Sorbonne from a citadel of creativity and critical thought into an obedient servant of the monarchy. By making itself useful to the crown and associating itself with the extravagant projects of Madame de Pompadour, it lost credibility among the people and estranged itself from the social movement that was renovating the cultural milieu in France. The critical-prophetic function that the university had abdicated shifted in the Parisian salons and there a new breed of dissenting intellectuals emerged. The Sorbonne supplied the manpower requirements of the monarchy, turned out a horde of courtiers, priests, and professors whose names are now deservedly forgotten, but the lively drinking places of Paris gave the world Voltaire, Diderot, d'Alembert, Holbach and Condorcet.

In their effort to stand above the political struggles that stirred and moved the larger society, the universities failed; instead, they learned to accept the tension between themselves and the holders of power as a necessary factor for maintaining the vitality of academic life. Where that tension ceased, as in the Sorbonne in the age of Voltaire, the university invariably lost its dynamism. This experience, replicated many times in many other countries, proved the theory that the university cannot divorce itself from the society to which it belongs. It is therefore senseless for advocates of academic freedom today to clamor for "immunity from the pressures of non-academic forces."

This issue to which advocates of academic freedom ought to address themselves is not whether the university should make itself relevant to the national community. The real issue is the manner of integration, the manner of making itself relevant to the life of the nation.

This does not mean, however, that the university should merely adapt itself to the social reality, reflecting it in the same way a mirror reflects whatever stands before it. The relationship between university and society is dialectical, one of dynamic interaction. Since the university must operate within the resources and capabilities of the larger society and constructively respond to the needs of its people, it must of necessity reflect the character of that society in its instructional and research programmes; but, on the other hand, the university as a reservoir of creative energy, has also the latent power to transform the society that shaped it. The highest contribution a university can offer to the national community is precisely to actualize this transformative power without debasing itself into a handmaiden of state and corporate bureaucracies.

In the Philippines today, the principal threat to academic freedom does not come from modern Torquemadas armed with the crude gadgets of inquisition; it comes from government agencies, from private corporations, from foreign foundations and international organizations who dangle consultancies and grants before a materially deprived intelligentsia. With the imposition of martial law, very few Filipino academics actually experienced torture and imprisonment – and, to my knowledge, no one has been driven to penury – for following Emmanuel Kant's dictum: "Dare to Know!" They are simply enured to a life of relative affluence and given the illusion of influence, and they end up as academic entrepreneurs engaged in "intellectual profiteering which adds nothing except to their incomes and academic ranks."

In other words, academic freedom in the Philippines is not threatened with death but with obsolescence. It is in danger of becoming obsolete because those who loudly defend and celebrate academic freedom evade situations where they might need to invoke it. Like all other freedoms, it has value only when actually used, and it has usefulness only to those who have ideas to profess which imperil the interests and outrage of those in power. It has meaning only where members of the university perform the essential function of social critics; otherwise it is worthless. Scholars whose brains are available for picking at a price have no use for academic freedom, what they need are business opportunities. Neither have those who merely extol academic freedom as an abstract right or defend it on the level of high principles, but who never exercise it in a politically effective way. Academic freedom is connected with social criticism, because activities supportive of the status quo will always be tolerated without need for special protection.

More than two decades ago, C. Wright Mills made these observations of the American intellectual scene: "There is little union in the same persons of knowledge and power; but persons of power do surround themselves with men of some knowledge... The man of knowledge has not become a philosopher king; but he has often become a consultant to a man who is neither king-like nor philosophical. It is not natural in the course of their careers for men of knowledge to meet with those in power. The links between university and government are weak, and when they do occur, the man of knowledge appears as an 'expert' which usually means as a hired technician."

Over the last four years, however, the tie-up between the men of knowledge and the men of power in the Philippines has grown alarmingly close. Professors with fancy academic degrees may now be found at the highest levels of government and business, not only as hired technicians but even as planners and decision-makers. This phenomenon of technocratization creates a different sort of threat to the integrity of academic institutions, as Robert M. Hutchins pointed out: "The most advanced industrial country, the United States, was pouring money into research through governmental agencies that had a mission and wanted the universities to help them carry it out. The university, if it accepted the money, accepted the mission, which was not the mission of the university, but of the agency. These grants required a kind and degree of specialization hitherto unknown, drew off professors from teaching, and made the agency, rather than the university, the nourishing mother, the Alma Mater of the professor."

History has shown that universities are most vulnerable to external manipulation when the faculty and students no longer feel themselves part of the community of learning, when academic life is viewed merely as a way of earning a living rather than a vocation or a calling. The restoration of that sense of community, however, is a difficult job in contemporary Philippines; more so in university as large and heterogenous as U.P., or even like Arts and Sciences with more than 400 faculty members, 19 specialized Departments and some 8,000 students.

But we are not deterred by the immensity of the task. Starting from the proposition that the rationale for an academic community is the need "to think together so that everybody may think better than he would alone," we have established organs for democratic participation wherein the faculty may continually discuss and directly pass judgment on the policies that govern their academic work. To make the faculty

less beholden to administrators and to compel the administrators to adopt a new style of leadership, the offices of Dean and Department Chairman have been divested of much of their traditional prerogatives.

Breaking up the authoritarian structures inherited from the past is an essential phase in the process of institutionalizing academic freedom because as Anthony Arblaster said, "Academic freedom and academic democracy go hand in hand. For the principal, though not the only, threats to freedom in education derive from the authoritarian structures of educational institution." It is never sufficient to have a tolerant person at the top who allows a high degree of freedom to teachers and students. "Such voluntary renunciations of the exercise of power and authority are always unreliable. They are apt to be temporary, since they are dependent not on acknowledged right, but on the occasionally liberal character of authorities concerned." This explains our current effort to democratize the policy-making structures in the U.P. College of Arts and Sciences.

One of the heartaches of college administration in the Philippines today is the difficulty of getting some of the more talented faculty members in certain departments to work on college projects without additional compensation. To a large extent they have lost their loyalty to the college that nurtured them and precisely employs them and gives them the academic prestige which they actually use as capital in their entrepreneurial endeavors. The college is forced to compete for their services with external agencies which offer fabulous honoraria and consultancy fees. But I am happy to discover that, in my faculty, there are still an appreciable number who have retained a healthy measure of idealism and commitment. These are usually your instructors, but they also include senior professors whose skills are and easily marketable and whose intellectual integrity restraints them from shifting to more profitable disciplines. They are the college, they are the university – and it is they to whom academic freedom has continuing relevance.

The art of teaching suffers from the spread of mercenary values in the academic profession. Professors who are too busy with commissioned researches and consultancies often consider teaching an onerous burden. Since they are left with little time to prepare for their classes, much less to explore new teaching techniques, they downgrade teaching and equate scholarship with research. Since the sort of research they do are not truly supportive of their teaching function; and, in fact , their outputs are almost always useful only to the agencies that subsidized them, they typically speak of research in the abstract – regardless of its purpose and regardless of its probable uses. They speak of knowledge for its own

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sake, unmindful of the fact that the information they generate must have definite practical value to their respective funding agencies and they ignore the more disturbing possibility that these agencies may use the data for projects which are morally repugnant.

In the University of the Philippines, a research project entitles one to reduction of teaching load, regardless of whether he gets an honorarium for doing it. What actually happens is that a faculty who gets a research grant shifts the burden of teaching to his less fortunate colleagues. And yet, when promotion time comes, he demands that research – even his type of research – be given a higher weight than teaching, on the ground that the researcher and the researcher alone has advanced frontiers of knowledge, even if what he actually advanced is only his income and the interests of his benefactor. If the university authorities go for this line of reasoning, the academic entrepreneur will enjoy the best of both worlds: he earns money for doing research and gets promoted for researching.

I have consistently maintained that teaching is the primary function of a university and its primary responsibility is to the students. The researches that ought to receive the highest priority should therefore be those that are supportive of the teaching function. Researches that support programmes of outside agencies ought to be undertaken by those agencies themselves, perhaps with personnel trained by the universities. But it is not a proper job of the university to do research for them; and it is utterly abominable if such research is done at the expense of the university's primary concern, namely higher education.

Lest I be misunderstood, I must emphasize at this juncture that I am neither against academics doing research nor am I suggesting that research should be divorced from public policy. Indeed, as citizens we ought to be concerned with public affairs and the mere fact that I agreed to speak before the Philippine Council for Policy Science should be evidence enough of my serious concern for questions of policy. Our civic duty should indeed find expression in our readiness to contribute our knowledge and our skills to national efforts.

It is the nature of that contribution which I am trying to question. Providing the youth with the critical faculties to pierce through the rhetorics of our leaders in order that they may judge themselves the empirical grounds, the philosophical framework, and the moral implications of public policies – this is the central role of the university; and need I add that it is also a more noble task than training technocrats or hotel and restaurant administrators?

It is not the proper function of a university to research on how best to carry out programmes already decided upon by the powers that be because the university, as the moral conscience of the nation, must reserve the right to challenge the rationality and morality of those programmes. Neither is it a proper function of a university to undertake evaluation studies of the programmes of the funding agencies because, most likely, the outputs of such studies are self-serving and justificatory in character.

In the context of contemporary Philippine reality, the demand for academic freedom should start from the assertion of our right to determine the purposes and priorities of academic work. To clamour for freedom from external pressures is futile as it is misdirected. Let us admit that the subordination of the university to external forces has internal causes and its liberation will come when its faculty and students, as a cohesive community, shall gain the courage and foresight to exercise their critical function.

There are numberless aspects of Philippine reality that ought to be studied, countless problems to be analyzed and policies to be evaluated. The university must relate itself to society by undertaking these projects, but according to its priorities, according to its own perception of the people's needs and aspirations. It is the national community that the university should serve, not the ones who rule it. If our convictions and our findings dictate that we denounce the policies and actions for our rulers, let us do so with courage, vigour and honesty. It is precisely this critical function that sets a value to academic freedom. Since the critical-prophetic function is indispensable to social progress, other and more vital and vibrant institutions will take it over whenever the universities relinquish it through default. We have seen how the salons usurped intellectual leadership from the Sorbonne, when the latter allowed itself to become an instrument of the ancient regime. And only a few years ago, we witnessed how our universities in the Philippines lost its intellectual leadership to "the parliaments of the streets."

We have indeed reason to worry about the future of a nation whose universities have degenerated into sanctuaries of entrenched social irrelevance and factories for the production of marketable skills.

When the men of intellect can no longer "define the purpose of their lives in words that stir the souls of the noble and chill the blood of the base," the relevance of academic freedom is indeed a dubious proposition.