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What can academics fruitfully do to foster intelligent institutional reform?

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You asked me to give a short statement on the following question: what can academics usefully do to foster intelligent institutional reform?

Reading your question I was struck by the fact that it features the adjective, ‘intelligent’, and the adverb, ‘usefully’. Hence the answer is actually included in the question: what academics usefully can do is to suggest intelligent solutions for our needed constitutional reform.

Academia's intelligence is the source of its relevance. That may seem a bit like stating the obvious, but it is not a mere luxury to repeat this once more in a society where anti-intellectualism is sometimes praised as the highest form of wisdom. When politicians espouse anti-intellectualism, populism is allowed to have its head. In other words: the wisdom of the ‘bar’, meaning the body of lawyers, is replaced by the chatter at the ‘bar’, meaning the counter where drunkards meet.

Academics do not enjoy more rights than other citizens. In a democracy, all citizens have the same entitlements but intellectuals and, more specifically, academics have more obligations. As society has invested more heavily in the academic community, academics should offer a greater return in terms of the benefits to society. But academics also enjoy the power of knowledge. That means: they are able to determine the social discourse and to mould public opinion, as a result of which they make a long-term impact on society. Knowledge is power.

An observation by the sociologist Thomas Luckmann rings truer for academics than for other citizens: “People are not only constituted by society, but also constitute society”. How does

Academia constitute society? Via three channels: education, research and service to the community.

The Re-Bel initiative and the symposium today strike me as a splendid example of a social service that has emerged at the initiative of the academic community itself rather than at the bidding of a business or public authority. That is quite an accomplishment. A courageous initiative in many ways.

First of all the initiative was launched by Academia itself. You did not wait for any instructions before deciding to take this step. That is courageous, given the heavy pressure now applied by the university authorities to net clients and attract funding. The advantage of this own-initiative is that you are not dependent upon a contracting entity. You are also at liberty to publish and publicise your findings without seeking prior permission or first having to unveil them to the contracting entity or client.

The outcome of your scientific activities does not have to be useful to anyone, except for the whole society and the country as a whole. They do not have to meet any conditions that have been set, except for the straightforward conditions of seriousness and clear-sightedness. You have no need to seek compromises. It is up to the politicians to seek halfway houses, backed up by the insights and proposals of your working group.

The second reason why this initiative is courageous is because it is the outcome of work undertaken by various centres of intelligence and cooperation between academics from various universities in this country. This inter-university cooperation in the human sciences is less self-evident than in the exact sciences. Those involved in the human sciences are drawn more towards individual research, which often nonetheless leads to unnecessary fragmentation and discontinuity.

Thirdly, the membership of this group is not confined to any one language community. Cooperation between universities from the north and south is obviously beyond dispute but is fraught with risk given the subject in question, constitutional reform. A subject that can become prey to emotions. I notice how academics too have to struggle to distance themselves from the culture in which they operate and thus from the prejudices of the culture to which they belong.

It has to be acknowledged that conventionalism is not unknown in scientific research either. A great deal of research is encapsulated in a paradigm, a framework of assumptions not open to discussion or discussed. The paradigm that is most dominant depends on the ‘internalistic’ struggle within science itself. For example, the neo-liberal paradigm self-evidently held sway in the economic sphere until recently. The legal philosopher Benoit Frydman from the ULB demonstrated a few years ago how Academia can be hamstrung by an ‘esprit de corps’.

Apart from the conventional dimension of science itself, the scientific setting is determined to some extent by the dominant themes of the cultural environment. In other words, while science offers society food for thought, society drives science with its prejudices. Is it not the case that the choice of theme in institutional debate of our country is decided on a regional basis to some extent both in the north and south of the language border? The key themes to the north and south appear to be quite at variance with each other: generally regional accountability in the north and national solidarity in the south.

The cooperation that will be developed here can help us in our endeavour to take on board and amplify each other's themes. An academic has to be able to take up the position of an opponent, invariably starting from the truth of the matter.

Scientific and academic cooperation over the community issue has to provide us with a ‘common set of truths’. Academics have to challenge each other to discover the truth.

Fourthly, I dare to call your initiative courageous because you will earn few ‘credits’ for the time you spend on this issue. You will not be quoted to any great extent or maybe not at all in key foreign publications. I am well aware how much pressure is applied to get involved with subjects that make an international impact and end up being quoted and mentioned in footnotes thereby helping to boost the level of academic prestige.

A subject such as Belgian constitutional reform is not the most appropriate one if the aim is to boost one's academic standing. It is to your credit that you are prepared to forsake the incentive to be included in an international footnote in favour of making a contribution to the nation's history.

This brings you face to face with a key social contribution the society expects from its brightest talents, namely to examine our social issues, as a result of which their participation in the public debate can be more than a TV sound bite or a quote in the newspaper. The academic community's public engagement in the media is of course very welcome and needed, but it can be given a greater impact as a result of this joint analysis.

Professor Philippe Van Parijs, a member of this symposium's core group, was perfectly right when he wrote in *Ethische Perspectieven* back in 2005: “It is unacceptable that the information that is required to boost the social debate and influence political decisions is left up to journalists and politicians working under the pressure of deadlines and tactical decisions.” And I might add that even an academic, when invited to deliver a soundbite under the pressure of a deadline, does not necessarily make an intelligent contribution.

This is precisely why I am looking forward to the scientific consultations and the academic dialogue in the context of Re-Bel. Here you are positioned at the interface of a university's three main tasks: education, research and social service.

Public opinion and the political community are crying out for academic leadership. After all, this concerns the future of us all. We have to prepare for the future intelligently, if it is to be of any use to us.

I would like to conclude with four “pointers”, which I address in all modesty to you, academics, as an answer to the question: “What can academics do?”

1. Contribute to the creation of a common vocabulary and analytic framework, in order to surpass misunderstanding between different language communities;
2. Fight against simplism (oversimplification) and against demagogues;
3. Understand politics. This means that you need to study game theory and the art of compromise. Academic work that neglects the need for coalition rule in Belgium lacks in sense of reality, and is therefore not all that academic;
4. Speak out. I thank you for having done that today.

Steven VANACKERE