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Title: The University and Its Discontents

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In many democracies, including India and the United States, universities are beleaguered institutions. The challenges of funding, the changing nature of the economy, the transformation of knowledge production, and the reconfiguration of methods of inquiry are putting immense pressure on them to change. Increasingly, however, the crisis of the university mirrors the crisis of democracy itself. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are in jeopardy. What is striking in both democracies is that the institutional form of the university, whether it is a public or a private institution, has not been a good predictor of how much a university might be protected.

As social institutions, universities perform many functions, from education to social mobility. Yet their primary vocation remains the cultivation, training, and exercise of the intellect: enabling human beings to acquire a deeper understanding of self, society, and nature. It is precisely this vocation that is now caught between two powerful critiques.

For the Right, the university's intellectual enterprise is often seen as corrupting national values. In this view, the university's purpose is tied to the nation-state and the promotion of a national culture. Historically, this has not been an inaccurate description of many universities. Yet that mission has always been in deep tension with the universalist aspirations and critical reason at the heart of the modern university. It is characteristic of our times that many assaults on universities in democracies, especially on academic freedom, are now legitimized in the name of nationalism. For the Right, the crisis of the humanities, in particular, represents a betrayal of their presumed duty to affirm national culture and serve national interests.

This shorthand, of course, is a caricature. But from the perspective of sections of the Left, universities have become complicit in privilege and exclusion. This critique is not only sociological, that universities fail to be sites of equal opportunity or social mobility, but epistemological. It challenges the very enterprise of reason and universality, arguing that these ideals themselves reproduce hierarchies by marginalizing and subjugating excluded identities.

The university thus finds itself in an impossible two-front war. The Right mistrusts it for national identities; the Left distrusts it for masking power under the guise of universality. Both, in different ways, erode faith in the idea that disinterested inquiry can serve a common good. The deeper question, then, is whether democracies still believe in the possibility of such inquiry, whether they can sustain institutions committed not to affirmation or representation, but to the patient, unsettling arduous, maddening labour of the intellect. The fate of the university, in this sense, is inseparable from the fate of democracy itself: both depend on the fragile conviction that reason, if freely exercised, can still bind us together.

First, it explains why, in democracies like India and the United States, opposition parties have been conspicuously silent in the face of assaults on universities. Across the political spectrum, there is now a broad consensus that universities should be subject to greater control—whether through regulation, funding mechanisms, or direct political oversight. The authoritarian-nationalist turn in these democracies has made such infringements on autonomy predictable. What is remarkable, however, is that even opposition parties no longer think it worth expending political capital in defence of the university. It is an extraordinary state of affairs when so few within the political establishment regard universities as institutions worth protecting.

Equally striking, in both India and the United States, is the hesitation of academics themselves to defend their institutions. In both societies, the professoriate enjoys considerable social prestige; yet when academic freedom or institutional autonomy comes under assault, it has proven unable to mount the kind of collective action that once defined the moral authority of the academy. Partly this reflects the internal inequalities and professional insecurities produced by the contemporary university; partly it reflects a deeper loss of confidence, an uncertainty about what, precisely, is being defended when one defends the university.

Second, the university itself is increasingly the victim of a crisis of representation. By representation, I do not mean social inclusion, important though that is, but the ability of a society to represent its own workings to itself. For those who actually inhabit universities, the caricatures projected by both Right and Left are almost unrecognizable. The pedagogical and research practices of most universities, and the daily life of classrooms, may vary in quality, but they hardly conform to the grotesque images offered in political rhetoric. Most teachers and students do not reduce reason to identity, nor are universities conspiracies against national interest. Yet, in a highly mediatized environment, exceptional instances are taken as emblematic of the whole.

One of the central challenges for academics, therefore, is to find ways of narrowing the gap between the actual purposes and practices of the university and the way they are represented in public discourse. The defence of the university will not come merely from within; it will depend on whether the university can once again become legible to the democracy of which it is a part.

This tension between what the university is, a set of differentiated disciplines, and what it claims to be, a space of limitless intellectual diversity, feeds directly into its crisis of representation. When universities misdescribe their own internal logic, they make themselves vulnerable to political caricature. The public, encountering the university through the language of "openness" and "pluralism," expects a forum where all views find equal expression; what it encounters instead are disciplined forms of inquiry governed by standards that inevitably exclude some claims as false, irresponsible, or irrelevant. This gap between the normative language universities use to describe themselves and the actual practices that sustain academic judgment becomes fertile ground for mistrust, often even within universities. In a sense, the university's failure to represent its own conditions of reasoning is part of the larger democratic malaise: the erosion of confidence in institutions that claim authority based on knowledge.

There is something to Alasdair MacIntyre's worry about the internal incoherence of the modern university. The modern university no longer shares an agreed-upon vision of what knowledge is for. It has become a collection of disciplines rather than a community of inquiry. Each discipline has its own methods, standards, and internal goods, but no higher order gives them

coherence or moral direction. The university has thus ceased to be an arena for the unified search for truth, and has instead become an assemblage of specialized enterprises.

For those of us with a Weberian sensibility, this fragmentation may seem an inevitable feature of modern knowledge production, and therefore not in itself a source of regret. Yet we should be more candid about the dissonance between this reality and the university's self-representation as an intellectually diverse space. Universities must, of course, guard against the exclusion of scholars for inconvenient political views—so long as such views do not compromise the pedagogical mission or research standards of the institution. But beyond that, universities do themselves a disservice when they portray themselves as open-ended arenas of boundless diversity rather than what they truly are: a collection of disciplined inquiries, each with its own standards of evidence, reasoning, and truth. Universities also need a measure of deep self-reflection. The prevailing public diagnosis is not that universities suffer from a deficit of freedom, but from a deficit of accountability. Even in the sciences, many in the private sector think, the protocols of the university are slowing down, not accelerating science. The question, then, is whether universities can be exemplary even by their own standards—and whether that exemplariness can be made visible to democratic publics in ways that restore trust. Can universities convincingly demonstrate that they remain among the most potent sites for the cultivation of the intellect, for the disciplined exercise of reason and imagination? And can they communicate that the freedom and institutional autonomy they demand are not privileges, but preconditions for that very cultivation? Only if academics can embody and articulate this connection between autonomy and intellectual integrity will the defence of the university carry moral and democratic weight.