

“What does it mean to accept a role as ‘critic and conscience of society’?”

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New Zealand’s Education Act 1989 gives universities a role as “critic and conscience of society”. But the act does not explain what this role amounts to. There is no case law in which the phrase is interpreted.

So how is it to be understood? What activities could it encompass? And why is it important?

In this talk, I’d like to offer some brief historical and philosophical reflections that situate the phrase in an intellectual tradition, namely the tradition of Kantian philosophy, and that relate the phrase to the idea of the political public sphere.

There are other ways in which we could read the phrase and flesh out its possible sense, but these seem to me to be cardinal reference points.

### **Criticism and Scientific Inquiry**

The first preliminary point to make is the Kantian one: that criticism is intrinsic or internal to the activity of rational inquiry. For Kant, this applies to all forms of scientific and scholarly inquiry pursued within the university.

Kant made this point in a famous passage of his *Critique of Pure Reason*:

Reason must in all its undertakings subject itself to criticism; should it limit freedom of criticism by any prohibition, it must harm itself, drawing upon itself a damaging suspicion. Nothing is so important through its usefulness, nothing so sacred, that it may be exempt from this searching examination, which knows no respect for persons. Reason depends on this freedom for its very existence. For reason has no dictatorial authority: its verdict is always simply the agreement of free citizens, of whom each one must be permitted to express, without let or hindrance, his objections or even his veto. (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A738-9/B766-7)

We see this intrinsically self-critical character of scientific inquiry reflected in the way the scientific community has traditionally organised itself: as an open, collaborative, disinterested, self-regulating community of inquirers.

- **Open** – Anyone is able to contribute to the project of research;

- **Collaborative** – All inquirers are expected to willingly and freely share the products of their intellectual labours with each other in order to further the collective project of scientific inquiry.
- **Disinterested** – The scientific inquirer is expected to exercise a moral integrity in their work, not fudging figures or skewing analysis to ensure that the investigation reaches a predetermined outcome.
- **Self-regulating** – The scientific community expects that the work of each will be subject to critical scrutiny and it accepts as valid only those results that meet the standards of validated methodologies. This principle is embodied, paradigmatically, in the practice of peer review.

Bruce Macfarlane argues in a recent *Times Higher Education* article that the ideal of scientific inquiry as an open, collaborative, disinterested, self-regulating project is today being undermined by “academic capitalism”.

The continuing reorganisation of the university sector along neo-liberal lines in New Zealand as in other countries has meant—to a greater or lesser extent—that **openness and collaboration** is being undermined in the name of proprietary interests, **disinterestedness** is being compromised by imperatives coming from both public and private sponsors, and **self-regulation** is being overridden by the use of extrinsic measures of research value, such as the valuing of research in terms of its prospects for commercialization, its social impacts, or its utility in helping secure further research funding.

Without having to construct a command economy in which the academic is overtly directed in what he or she is to research, the system of academic capitalism gently steers academic research in the direction desired by government, business, and other wealthy sponsors.

Even so, while the trends Macfarlane identifies may be putting pressure on academic practice, according to Kant’s account of reason it is ultimately self-defeating to sever the connection between science and “the freedom of criticism”.

Without free and honest critical scrutiny, the currency of scientific authority is quickly devalued.

From the point of view of scientific research, academic freedom to publish research and to have it pass through a process of critical scrutiny is not a luxury but a necessity.

The activity of *criticism*, therefore, is and will remain essential to the life of science. Without it, scientific inquiry is reduced to a parody of itself.

## **The Public Sphere**

To this point, I have only spoken about the value of criticism for the pursuit of science, and I think that should be relatively uncontroversial.

But I now want to take a wider view. We need to consider **the idea of the public sphere** in a broader sense, as a wider set of practice of public argumentation and criticism.

The value of public argumentation—of public scrutiny and public accountability—is now deeply embedded within our democratic culture and public institutions, and for good reason.

But it is instructive to recall the origins and history of **the political public sphere** as a feature of modern democratic societies.

The most enduringly influential account of the idea of the public sphere and its history is the one developed by the contemporary German sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas, and I want to remind you of his analysis briefly.

According to Habermas, we can trace the origins of the political public sphere to the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Reformation effectively weakened the monopoly of the church on the interpretation of Scripture. This helped to establish limits on the extent of church authority and, crucially, it legitimated the use of reason by individuals who now began to exercise their ability to judge the validity of received dogma for themselves.

Over subsequent centuries, the establishment of methodical scientific inquiry as a reliable and trusted source of knowledge presented a new and even greater challenge to the ecclesiastical and secular powers, and these powers gradually lost their gatekeeper roles as mediators of epistemic and moral authority and as a result they were forced to renegotiate the basis of their role and position in society.

By the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, thanks to a growing market economy, capitalist enterprise, and colonial expansion, a newly wealthy *bourgeois class* emerged as a power bloc that could no longer be contained by traditional feudalistic authority structures. And over time across Europe a new balance of power came to be institutionalised in legal rights: rights to parliamentary representation; freedom of association; right to information; freedom of the press.

These three elements (1) the de-centralized use of reason, (2) the consolidation of the scientific method, and (3) the expanding domain of bourgeois autonomy over against traditional powers, provided the conditions for (4) the emergence of *the political public sphere* during the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

What, then, do we mean by the “political public sphere”? In the words of Habermas:

The public sphere [is] a sphere which mediates between society and state, in which the public organizes itself as the bearer of public opinion... We speak of the political public sphere... when public discussion deals with objects connected to the activity of the state... [It] refers to the tasks of criticism and control which a public body of citizens informally—and, in periodic elections, formally as well—practices *vis-à-vis* the ruling structure. (Habermas, “The Public Sphere”, 49-50)

In other words, the political public sphere is the space in which citizens develop, test and articulate their views on the governing powers and their actions—*not in order to rule, but for the purpose of supervising the governing powers, in order to hold power accountable and to shape it in the general interest.*

Alongside the freedom of *scientific* criticism and the literary public sphere, which I discussed earlier, we have here a closely related freedom of *political* criticism and the associated political public sphere. And incidentally, these two come packaged closely together in Kant, albeit with pretty severe restrictions on political criticism.

The political public sphere took shape in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, with public argument taking place in pages of political newspapers and journals, as well as in face-to-face gatherings in cafes and salons.

And public opinion was mobilised and represented by a burgeoning array of citizen's associations, unions, and political parties.

Needless to say, the ideal of the public sphere—as a space of open, inclusive, reasoned and un-coerced discourse—was never fully realized. In its heyday, the political public sphere of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century was almost exclusively male, educated, bourgeois. And even today cultural codes and hierarchies of power prevent certain individuals and groups from participation in public debate.

Nonetheless, public discourse has established itself as a legitimate source of political authority. Today it is an uncircumventable feature of the political landscape and, sometimes, it is a potent vehicle of democratization. In contemporary politics, public accountability and political legitimacy stand and fall together.

From the very beginning, however, public discourse has been subject to at least two corrupting factors. On one hand, the public sphere is corrupted by the intrusion of governmental power in the form of  **censorship** and **propaganda**. On the other hand, it is corrupted by the intrusion of private interests either in the form of advertising or in the form of manipulation, spin doctoring, misinformation, cash for comment, bribery, and so forth.

Where these intrusions become normalized, the result in Habermas's terms is a "refeudalization" of the public sphere (which he latter conceptualized as a "colonization of the lifeworld"): echoing the earlier theatrics of ecclesiastical and aristocratic power, the public sphere once again becomes a realm in which dominant powers represent their hegemony and reinforce it. Under these conditions the public sphere no longer functioned as a space in which public opinion is formed autonomously on the basis of informed argument and un-coerced agreement. Instead, it is steered by powerful interests.

### **The university as a component of the political public sphere**

The university has not always been considered a component of the political public sphere, and for obvious reasons. In its medieval form the university was the guardian of received wisdom and an authority on theological orthodoxy. It formed a part of the system of ecclesiastical power that the political public sphere was intended to supervise. The Enlightenment ideal that Kant defended, with its network of scientific and philosophical collaborators and belief in free criticism, existed outside the walls of the university before it existed within them. When the Royal Society began admitting members in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, for instance, few if any of its fellows held university appointment at Oxford or Cambridge; almost all were wealthy amateurs and not professional scientists. The very idea of the research university, in fact, is barely 200 years old.

In more recent times, however, universities have been a stronghold of free inquiry and a vital source of social and political criticism.

And, as we have seen, it is the stated intention of the Education Act to preserve and enhance the autonomy of universities and academic freedom.

Read against this broad backdrop, it seems clear that what the language of the Education Act effectively does is to embed the university in New Zealand as a cornerstone of the political public sphere. The freedom to question and test received wisdom, to put forward new ideas and to state controversial or unpopular opinions—which is the very hallmark of the political public sphere—is expressly conferred upon universities. And the task of critically supervising the public powers and holding them to account—which is the central function of the political public sphere—is also arguably implied in the language of “critic and conscience of society”.

If this reading is plausible, then we who are academics in New Zealand should view ourselves as authorized to be active participants in the political public sphere—not just to do public-good research, and not just to communicate the results of scientific research, as important as these are, but also to critically judge the use of public power and to hold those public powers to account.

Legally endowed with these public roles and responsibilities, the university is not merely a constituent part of *the economy*, but it is also a constituent part of *civil society*. And while there is tremendous social value in university-led innovation in science and technology, it is our public-political role that we need to be encouraged to take up more actively. Just as surely as there will always be incentives to contribute to economic prosperity, there will always be disincentives to contribute to the democratic life of our society. Universities as a rule are ambivalent about their outspoken employees; and journalists and politicians take no prisoners in the cut and thrust of public debate.

As researchers in New Zealand we need you to continue to fly the flag of public-good research and to defend the basic values of openness, collaboration, disinterestedness and self-regulation and to expose the corrupting effects of dangling carrots and threatening sticks.

But we also need to do more to build and strengthen the fragile networks of support and collaboration that make up the fabric of our intellectual life together. These can exist within or without the institutionalised university. But, in New Zealand at least, in the institutional context of the university we enjoy the legal freedom and the social standing to articulate critique in our political context

These legal freedoms are meaningless and worthless until they are taken up, interpreted, owned, and utilised.