

Frans van Hasselt lecture, delivered on 21 November 2019, at the Oude Kerk in Delft

by

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Dear students, colleagues, and citizens,

In my lecture tonight, I will ask what role the university should play in protecting liberal democracies. We all know what universities are. But the term ‘liberal democracy’ may not be familiar for everyone - and since it is crucial for the argument I would like to develop, let me explain. *Liberal democracy* is a type of political regime that entails two elements.² On the one hand, there is the word ‘democracy’, which refers to the popular will: citizen should be treated as political equals, and have an equal opportunity to take part in political decision making, either directly or indirectly. On the other hand, there is a set of mechanisms and institutions aimed at protecting individual rights and liberties and procedural fairness, such as the rule of law, the protection of the free press and other key public institutions, and the separation of powers. This set of institutions is especially important to protect minorities against what political scholars call ‘the tyranny of the majority’. They ensure procedural fairness and protect us against political abuse.

Liberal democracy is not the only possible type of political regime. Other regimes are authoritarian regimes, dictatorships, and theocracies. And there are two regime types that, according to political scientists, are increasing in their numbers and their power. The first is *undemocratic liberalism*, in which citizens have democratic voting rights, but effectively the preferences of the elites dominate the political decision making. The second is *illiberal democracy*, in which the rights of minorities are no longer protected, and the popularly

¹ For helpful comments and discussions while preparing this lecture, I am grateful to Joel Anderson, Colin Hickey, Annelien De Dijn, Bart Mijland, Roland Pierik, and Eric Schliesser.

² See e.g. Yascha Mounk (2018), *The People vs. Democracy. Why Our Freedom is in Danger & How to Save it*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1-21.

elected leaders can enact the will of the people as they interpret it. In illiberal democracies, the ruling leaders have curtailed the capability for criticism of the free press, independent thinkers, political opponents and they have weakened the legal system.

I will not argue tonight, but rather take as my starting point, that we should strive for liberal democracies. But please note that the word 'liberal' in the notion 'liberal democracies' does not refer to economic liberalism. The term liberal democracy refers to a political system, not to an economic system. These are two distinct issues, and should not be confused. A liberal democracy could -at least in principle- go together with various economic systems, such as a pure capitalist economic system, or a regulated capitalism, or a form of market socialism, or a form of property-owning democracy, which is an economic regime with free market but in which the ownership of the productive capital is widely dispersed, because workers are co-owners of companies - and so forth. There is a large literature in contemporary political philosophy discussing these questions, but an ethical assessment of economic systems is not my topic for tonight. The only thing I want to say is that the term 'liberal' is used for two different things - in an economic sense as referring to the priority of freedom of enterprise and free markets, and in a political sense as referring to the priority of basic civic and political rights, protection of minority rights, and the institutional design that protects those rights with the separation of powers. I will only refer to liberalism in the second, political sense.

If we keep that clarification in mind, we have very good reasons to want to live in a liberal democratic society. On the one hand, we should not want to be ruled by elites, whether technocratic elites or financial elites, who decide on policies that the majority of the people do not want upon due deliberation. Hence, we should not want nondemocratic forms of political liberalism. On the other hand, we should also not want to be ruled by undemocratic rulers who take away our individual basic rights, and who weaken the balance of powers between different political spheres. We should not want to live in illiberal democracies.

Therefore, in what follows, I will start from the premise that we should strive for, and protect, liberal democracies. I will ask what role the university plays in protecting liberal democracies, and how that role is currently faring. This may sound like a very conceptual or theoretical topic. But I hope to convince you that it is very important to all of us here in the

room - whether we are students, professors, or citizens of liberal democracies such as the Netherlands.

There have been times in history in which we did not live in a liberal democracy. For the Netherlands, the last time this happened, was when our country was occupied by the German occupiers, between 1940 and 1945. Many of us, growing up in the second half of the last century, have for a long time held the belief that in Europe, countries that already were or would become democratic, would remain liberal democracies.

But perhaps that assumption has been too optimistic. Current scholarship in political science, presents us a sobering picture. As the political scientist Cas Mudde shows in his recent book *The Far Right Today*, far-right politics is again taking central stage in several countries such as Brazil, India and the United states, but is also increasing its profile and support within Europe.³

Any of us who had assumed that once a liberal democracy, a country would remain a liberal democracy, may have been wrong. We simply cannot take for granted that liberal democracies are stable and once established, will not turn into another political regime.

In their book *How Democracies Die*, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, two professors of government at Harvard University, explain how democracies are inherently vulnerable to being transformed into authoritarian regimes. They show how throughout history and on all continents, political outsiders are invited to share power by mainstream politicians, as a strategy of containment. Levitsky and Ziblatt ascribe this strategy as being based on “a lethal mix of ambition, fear and miscalculation”.⁴ But this strategy tends to backfire, and in all cases the liberal democrats are “willingly handing over the keys of power to an autocrat-in-the-making.” This pattern occurred, for example, with Adolf Hitler in Germany, Alberto Fujimoro in Peru and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. In other cases, such as the case of Victor Orbán in Hungary, a politician first serves as a democratically elected leader, and after being in power for a while, drops the protection of basis rights, weakens the powers of the journalists and independent press and explicitly embraces illiberal forms of democracy or authoritarian regimes. What Levitsky’s and Ziblatt’s overview of research in political science and political

³ Mudde, Cas (2019) *The Far Right Today*, Cambridge: Polity, p. 30.

⁴ Levitsky, Steven and Daniel Ziblatt (2018) *How Democracies Die*. London: Viking. P. 13.

history shows, is that liberal democracies are vulnerable to become illiberal or non-democracies by a set of processes *that start from the inside*. Defenders of liberal democracies thus always have to keep reminding themselves that the balance between the protection of basic rights and the rule of law on the one hand, and the democratic will on the other hand, is inherently vulnerable in our political system. We therefore must always remain vigilant.

But if liberal democracies are inherently vulnerable, what should we then do to protect them? In his very short book *On Tyranny*, the historian Timothy Snyder, gives his readers 20 lessons that we can learn from the twentieth century.⁵ Snyder is a professor of history at Yale University, and specializes in the twentieth history of Central and Eastern Europe, including the holocaust. He has written several lengthy academic books on particular aspects of the wars and tyrannies that plagued Europe in the first half of the last century. Yet in this little book, he is not addressing his fellow professors in history, or his students; instead, he is addressing all of us, all citizens of democratic societies who like to live in peaceful democracies, and to enjoy the individual freedoms that liberal democracies have brought us. Hence, he writes in a very accessible, easy way - but with a clear goal: to tell his fellow citizens in the US, but also those in Europe and elsewhere, that they should not take democracy for granted.

Snyder has 20 pieces of advice for those of us who want to defend liberal democracies against the risk that they slide into becoming a tyranny. One of those pieces of advice is: *Defend institutions*. Let me quote Snyder:

“It is institutions that help us to preserve decency. They need our help as well. Do not speak of “our institutions” unless you make them yours by acting on their behalf. Institutions do not protect themselves. They fall one after the other, unless each is defended from the beginning. So choose an institution you care about - a court, a newspaper, a law, a labour union - and take its side.” (Snyder, 2017, p. 22).

This is exactly what I will do tonight - I will defend the university, the public university, against it being reduced to merely an engine of growth and innovation and it being stripped of one

⁵ Snyder, Timothy (2017) *On Tyranny. Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*. New York: Tim Duggan Books.

of its core functions, namely to provide critical analyses of society. But before embarking on that task to defend the public university, I want to highlight another lesson that Snyder draws from the 1930s. His eighth lesson says: Stand out. "Someone has to", Snyder says. "it is easy to follow along. It can feel strange to do or say something different. But without that unease, there is no freedom."⁶ Snyder gives in his book the example of Winston Churchill, who decided that no matter what, and despite that at that point he had no allies, the British would fight Hitler. According to Snyder, Churchill's dedication to fight against Hitler inspired the British people to not give up, but to persist.

Sometimes, a single person, who is courageous enough to speak up, can change the course of history. Frans Van Hasselt did exactly this, when in November 1940 he gave a speech here in Delft, which became the start of the student resistance. Other students at other universities in the Netherlands similarly engaged in acts of resistance that put their own life in great danger, and many of them died in concentration camps. It is not difficult to interpret the heroic actions of Frans Van Hasselt as both a defence of basic liberties of his fellow citizens who were Jewish, as well as a defence of the university in which professors and students work and study in service of the truth, and hence one's religious, ethnic or other form of personal affiliation should not determine whether one can teach there. Frans Van Hasselt paid the highest price for his defence of those liberties and of that institution - he died in Buchenwald in 1942.

In my view, we owe it to Frans van Hasselt, and to honour the sacrifice that he and many other Dutch students, professors and other citizens made in the 1940s, to examine critically the current state of our liberal democracies, and to ask whether we are properly caring for the institutions that sustain and support liberal democracies.

But, you might wonder by now, what does all of this have to do with the university? To answer this question, we must first ask what universities are for. Luckily, throughout history, many scholars have written elaborate answers on this question. Yet most scholars writing on the university, have focused on one particular mission, or one particular purpose of the university as the single most important one. This, to my mind, is a mistake. I would like to defend the claim that, in essence, there are three important functions to the university, and that all three are important. Those three functions are, firstly, to pursue curiosity-driven

⁶ Snyder, p. 51.

education and research; second, to contribute to innovation and problem solving; and third, to provide critical analyses of societal issues.

Let us start with the first function of the university - *curiosity-driven research and education*. This type of knowledge is knowledge for its own sake. It could concern any question that a student, scholar or scientist would like to ask themselves. What did the Earth's climate look like 500,000 years ago? What role do genes play in diseases that we do not yet fully understand? How does contemporary youth culture change and what effect does this have on the place young people take in the world? This function of the university has been defended by several scholars who wrote on the purpose of the university throughout history, such as the German philosopher Karl Jaspers. The worry was mainly how the university could avoid becoming an instrument in the hand of either the Church or the state, and how it could keep its intellectual independence, while often nevertheless being financially dependent on the Church or the state.

The second function of the universities is its *innovation and problem-solving function*. From this perspective, the task of the universities is to contribute to ground-breaking innovations, whether or not in collaboration with the business community. According to this view, universities innovate in two ways. Firstly, by aiming for technological innovations and in collaboration with companies to bring these to the market. Secondly, by devising effective and efficient solutions to all kinds of concrete problems in society. In this way, universities can promote our material prosperity, but they can also look for solutions to diseases, ecological problems, urban policy issues or other practical social challenges. This function is known to any of us working in contemporary universities, since as researchers and teachers we are increasingly required to explain how we make ourselves useful for society, and our research funding increasingly focusses on and requires collaboration with partners from industry or society.

The third function, *the critical function*, is based on the question what the role of the university is in a democratic society, in which all people are seen as morally equal. This critical function means that the university's task is to hold up a mirror to society and to make critical analyses of social issues and developments. The university must carry out research that enables citizens to make well-informed individual and collective decisions. And the university must form students into critical thinkers, who have the ability to distinguish true from untrue

statements, who know how to search for answers to questions in a well-considered manner, and who can put specific issues in a broader context.

Sometimes this critical function requires us to look into questions that are very complex, and where new scholarship is needed. My own current research fits into this category, as I am asking the question whether we could morally and politically justify that there should be upper limits to how rich a person can be.⁷ This is a very complex question, since there are many initial thoughts one might have about reasons why such an upper limit to wealth should or should not exist. Philosophical research that is properly informed by empirical knowledge from a broad spectrum of the social sciences as well as history, is needed to assess whether these initial thoughts are solid and survive sustained analysis, or whether they are flawed. This is an example in which curiosity-driven research works in tandem with the critical function of the university.

The critical function of the university often also translates into societal outreach. It then requires not so much the creation of new knowledge, but rather to apply existing academic knowledge to a concrete case or incident in society. A recent example is a piece that the legal philosopher Nanda Oudejans wrote last week in *Het Parool*, in which she looked at the reactions of politicians and public commentators on the ruling of the Dutch court that the Dutch state has a legal obligation to make an effort to bring the so-called Dutch IS-children back to the Netherlands.⁸ These are children from Dutch mothers who joined the violent struggle of Islamic State. Dutch politicians of various stripes, including members of the government, expressed being unhappy with this ruling, and that they would prefer not to bring those children back to the Netherlands. In doing so, some were clearly irritated by the fact that judges, because of the separation of powers, always have to look critically at the political choices that are made. Yet Oudejans explains that the judges are legally and morally permitted to make this ruling, since one of the tasks of the judiciary in a liberal democracy is to protect the rights of individuals, even from despised minorities, against the popular will. It may well be that the majority of Dutch voters do not want to take those children and their

⁷ Robeyns, Ingrid (2017) 'Having too Much', in: J. Knight and M. Schwartzberg (eds.), *Wealth: NOMOS LVI*. New York: New York University Press, pp. 1-44; and Robeyns (2019) 'What, if Anything, is Wrong with Extreme Wealth?', *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 20(3), pp. 251-266.

⁸ <https://www.parool.nl/columns-opinie/de-rechter-mag-zich-wel-met-politiek-bemoeien~ba47eb19/>

mothers back on Dutch territory. But the judge always has to critically look at what he rulers decide and test these majority decisions against the national and international legislation.

Why would this critical function of the university be important not just for universities, but also for societies? The answer to that question has eloquently been formulated by Robert Maynard Hutchins, who was the President and later Chancellor at the University of Chicago in the period after the second world war. In 1951, Robert Hutchings published a paper with the title “The Freedom of the University”.⁹ Hutchins defined the university as “a center of independent thought” and held the view that “a university faculty is a group set apart to think independently and to help other people to do so”. He was very clear that even if faculty members make arguments and statements that are not popular with the public, they should retain the freedom to do so. Yet more importantly, Hutchins argued that this freedom of the university is important *for society itself*, rather than only for the faculty. Let me quote him:

“Such centers [of independent thought] are indispensable to the progress, and even to the security, of any society. Perhaps the short lives that dictatorships have enjoyed in the past are attributable as much to this as to any other single thing: dictatorship and independent thought cannot exist together; yet no society can flourish long without independent thought. Independent thought implies criticism, and criticism is seldom popular in time of war or of danger of war. Then every effort is made to force conformity of opinion upon the entire population, and the country often goes into an ecstasy of tribal self-adoration. This loss of balance is unfortunate for the country.” (Hutchins, 1951, p. 95).

The context in which Hutchins wrote was historically a very specific context, in which any professor suspected to have communist sympathies, was no longer sure they could keep their job. Hutchins argued that this great good of independent thought was under threat, since there was a “general atmosphere of repression” caused by ‘McCarthyism’ at American universities. Yet his argument that the freedom of the university is not only crucial for the very essence of the university itself, but also for a healthy democracy and society, are still valid, as I will argue in more detail in a minute.

Let me summarize. The university has three functions: firstly, doing research and teaching driven by curiosity, secondly, aiming at innovation and problem-solving, and thirdly,

⁹ Hutchings, Robert (1951), ‘The Freedom of the University’, *Ethics*, LXI(2), pp. 95-104.

providing critiques of societal questions. All three functions have a legitimate place at the university. All three are important, and all three apply to the three main tasks of the university - research, teaching, and societal outreach and service.

In order to not be misunderstood, I want to stress that I am not contesting the innovation and problem-solving function of the university. My critique is rather that in recent decades, the innovation function has come to dominate. Many contemporary scholarly books written on the topic, such as Stefan Collini's *What are Universities for?*, or Martha Nussbaum's book *Not for Profit*, lament that universities are increasingly judged for their contribution to economic production through innovation, or for contributing to solving practical problems in society.¹⁰ In the governmental policies in the Netherlands, universities are primarily seen through the lens of innovation and problem-solving.

What evidence do I have to believe that this is true? First, a significant amount of research funding goes to the so-called *topsectoren* - economic areas in which the Netherlands is considered to be strong. The Dutch Research Council, NWO, allocated 550 million euros over 2018 and 2019 to this type of research that brings industries and scientists together. Second, for grant applications at NWO, the importance of showing how this affects societal issues or will meet some needs in societies has increased over time. Dutch scholars, across all disciplines, have complained that curiosity-driven research is under pressure, which is in part of course also due to the fact that academic research in general is underfunded with at least one billion euros - to be precise, 1,15 billion Euro according to WOinActie, an activist group of scholars and students, or 1,5 billion Euro according to the VSNU, the association of Dutch universities. Third, in the Netherlands, the organization of entrepreneurs is in a structural networking platform with the universities, whereas societal organizations, such as Amnesty International or organizations protecting the rights of children or refugees or animals or the climate or any other vulnerable cause, are not. What justifies this special treatment and this greater power given to the lobby of the entrepreneurs over the lobby of organizations defending the rights of public causes and vulnerable groups? After all these years, I still haven't come across a good reason.

¹⁰ Stefan Collini (2012) *What Are Universities For?* London: Penguin Books; Martha Nussbaum (2010), *Not for Profit. Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton University Press.

Curiosity-driven research and education is recognized by the government as a fundamental task for universities. But universities are finding it increasingly difficult to obtain sufficient funding for this type of research. And the ministers of Higher education and research usually want this fundamental research to ultimately lead to something that is useful for society and thus contributes to the university's innovation function. Moreover, we also see a tendency for curiosity-driven research to ultimately be valued in an instrumental way - though perhaps more in a probabilistic sense: it is seen as research that serves as a starting point for the potential of innovation-oriented research in the future. The curiosity-driven function of the universities may have been neglected, but the situation of the critical function of the university is not better; in fact, I think it may be even worse. Because not only has the critical function been neglected by some administrators and politicians, it has also come under attack from other angles. And that is not only an essential threat to the university itself, but also to liberal democratic societies.

The critical function is the most vulnerable of the three functions of the university, because there will always be powerful parties in society, who want to maintain their power, and who feel threatened by critical analysis. That is precisely why academic freedom is so incredibly important: after properly using the scientific method, and keeping up with academic standards of truth-seeking, scientists must be able to say what they believe follows from their analyses, even if that message is not what some people like to hear.

It is clear that not everyone is fond of the critical function of the university. On a small scale, we see that companies and organisations that are funding research sometimes exert subtle pressure to choose a focus that is more favourable for them, or to use less sharp formulations. At the political level, history shows that authoritarian regimes and tyrannies prefer to abolish this critical function altogether. Remco Breuker, professor of Korea Studies in Leiden, clearly shows in his book *De B.V. Noord Korea* how the humanities are dead in North Korea. There are historians, but they have no choice but to write propaganda for “the great leader”, because otherwise they are at very high risk to pay for it with their own lives.¹¹

Dictators, tyrants and leaders with megalomania must try to suppress the social sciences and the humanities, because they do research with results that can undermine their

¹¹ Remco Breuker (2018) *De B.V. Noord Korea. Een Kernmacht in de Marge*. Amsterdam: Prometheus, pp. 138-162.

political goals. This explains why scholars from the humanities and social sciences in Turkey have to be so careful and why some are self-censoring. And that explains why in Hungary Victor Orbán's government has made it impossible for the Central European University to work in Budapest any longer. This university puts research and education on human rights, democracy, and the rule of law at the heart of its mission. This is unwelcoming for Orbán, who is striving for an illiberal democracy in which civil rights and individual freedoms are drastically curtailed.

I started this lecture by mentioning that the term “liberal democracy” stands for a society that gives everyone an equal share in democratic decision-making, that protects a set of basic liberties for all, and hence that protects minorities against the risk of tyranny of the majority. This protection is provided by constitutionally laid down fundamental rights and freedoms, which are secured by the legal system. The university, together with the free press, is an important institution in liberal democracy because its task is to analyse whether the freedoms of citizens are still guaranteed, whether governments operate democratically, and whether political actors do not proclaim falsehoods and spread propaganda.

On the one hand, the critical function of the university undermines the plans of politicians who want to implement policy in a technocratic manner for which there is no democratic basis. It is then up to the journalists and academics to analyse and criticize this, as happened, for example, after the technocratic European policy that followed the last financial crisis. On the other hand, the critical function of universities and the media also irritates political parties that do not care about individual civil rights, and that are nostalgic for a totalitarian regime that severely restricts these individual rights and freedoms.

From the work of philosophers, political scientists and historians such as Jason Stanley, Timothy Snyder, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt we learn that democratically elected politicians with totalitarian aspirations first suppress those civil rights and individual freedoms before they can move on to an authoritarian regime. They do this by systematically undermining the public institutions that are crucial to finding the truth and protecting these individual rights. Think specifically of attacking academics, journalists, judges, lawyers, politicians from other parties, and all organisations that work with independent knowledge or aim at protecting individual fundamental rights. If these institutions are sufficiently weakened, and as a result the resistance to spreading propaganda has also diminished, these illiberal parties can further strengthen their grip on power through the use of propaganda and

manipulation. It is crucial to realise that in the past, many dictatorships used to seize power starting from within a democratic system. Liberal democracy is inherently vulnerable to processes of propaganda, lies and framing because it allows the tyranny of the majority to reign through the ballot box.¹²

It is therefore crucial that citizens, politicians, judges, academics and journalists defend these core institutions of liberal democracies. As Timothy Snyder tells us, the second lesson on how we can protect liberal democracy is: *Defend institutions*. Defend the free press that separates lies from truths. Defend the social lawyers that ensures that access to justice for all is guaranteed. Defend the universities so that they are not reduced to their innovation function but can also continue to perform their critical function.

All this is relevant in the Netherlands in 2019. Earlier this year, on the 21st of March, Thierry Baudet, the leader of the new right-wing party *Forum voor Democratie*, said that we are being destroyed "by the people who should be protecting us. We are being undermined by our universities, our journalists. By the people who receive our art subsidies and who design our buildings. And above all, we are being undermined by our governors."¹³ That Baudet started this part of his speech by attacking the two truth-seeking institutions should come as no surprise. At the universities, the political primacy of human rights and the moral primacy of individual freedoms are investigated and defended in various social sciences and humanities, and rhetoric and propaganda are distinguished from arguments by relying on the scientific method. Baudet would like to get rid of judges that are restricting the popular will, whereas Nanda Oudejans explains that this is precisely what the separation of powers in a liberal democracy entails. Baudet wants to weaken the critical function of the university, just as he is attacking other social institutions that are holding up mirrors to societies: judges that test governmental decisions against Dutch law or international law, as well as museums that engage forms of art that hold up mirrors to racists practices and traditions.

Bearing Snyder's 20 lessons in mind, we must defend those institutions. We must defend the media, the museums, the judges, and the universities. Therefore, when Baudet

¹² Snyder, *op ed.*; Levitsky and Ziblatt, *op ed.*; Stanley, Jason (2015) *How Propaganda Works*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. (2018) *How Fascism Works. The Politics of Us and Them*. New York: Random House.

¹³ <https://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/spreektekst-thierry-baudet-verkiezingsavond-20-maart-2019~be2a1539/>, translation from Dutch mine.

gave his speech on the 21st of March, the leadership of Dutch universities, and the Minister of Higher Education and Science, should have immediately condemned this attack on the universities. On social media, many individual academics, especially those working in the humanities and social sciences, put Baudet's statement in a historical context, and expressed their great concern. But it remained quiet on the side of VSNU, which should have spoken out in one voice.¹⁴ Of the individual universities, Carel Stolker, the Rector Magnificus of Leiden University told his university's newspaper six weeks after Baudet's speech, that he felt that Baudet's statement was unacceptable.¹⁵ To the best of my knowledge that was the only official condemnation of this statement by the Dutch universities. This is worrying, because silence tolerates and normalizes such an institution-undermining attack. Luckily, when Baudet announced a few weeks later that he would open a hotline were students could report if they were "indoctrinated by the political views of their teachers", the VSNU did react that this was absurd, and damaging to the working of the university.¹⁶

What did the Minister do after March 21st? Interestingly, Minister van Engelshoven immediately published a tweet, in which she wrote that she found Baudet's statement that society is being undermined by our universities very reprehensible. "We must stand up for academia. Society is built on the work & knowledge of scientists, scholars & teachers. We must protect academic freedom, not make it suspicious."

The Minister was right: this was an appalling statement, but sadly one that fits in with the historical pattern of how democratically elected politicians aim at weakening liberal democracies. And she deserves praise for doing what the university leadership, for whatever mysterious reason, did not do, on March 21st. Administrators, like scientists, must not remain silent when one of the university's core functions is attacked. This may show that university leadership view the university too much from the point of view of its innovation function, and insufficiently from the point of view of its critical function.

Strangely enough, however, the minister's reaction also reveals a paradox, of which she may well not be aware. On the one hand, the minister understood the danger of Thierry

¹⁴ The VNSU is the Union of the employers/leadership of all Dutch Universities. See https://www.vsnunl.nl/en_GB or, for the Dutch site, <https://www.vsnunl.nl/NL>

¹⁵ <https://www.mareonline.nl/nieuws/rector-cliteur-moet-afstand-nemen-van-baudets-uitspraak-over-ondermijnende-universiteiten/>

¹⁶ <https://www.vsnunl.nl/NL/nieuwsbericht/nieuwsbericht/504-vereniging-van-universiteiten-neemt-afstand-van-meldpunt.html>

Baudet's statements. But the minister does not see that her own policies towards higher education, which prioritize the innovation and problem-solving function, weaken the university itself, and especially its critical function. In her own policy, the minister mainly starts from the innovation function of the university, and merely pays lip-service to the curiosity-driven function. Scholars and researchers in universities are no longer put in the condition to fulfil the obligations they have to hold up a critical mirror towards societies, to analyse and discuss societal trends, to explain and critically assess societal institutions.

It is becoming increasingly difficult for academics to enact the critical function of the university. There are different reasons for this. Researchers are too dependent on industries with whom they have to collaborate. Due to the severe time pressure that affects them too, they often do not have the time to make a careful analysis, weigh all aspects, and properly prepare for media interviews, and hence they decline. Moreover, they might not be sure that the university will protect them in case they are attacked by members of interest groups who do not like their critical reflections.¹⁷ So, the most rational thing for an academic to do, is to take the safe road, and not perform critical analyses.

One might even conclude that investigative journalism has taken over part of the role of universities: they are better able to uncover truths that are important for societies, ranging from the panama-papers, to accounts of how the financial crisis was really dealt with. Perhaps it is increasingly impossible for academic staff in universities to exercise this critical function. If I am right that the innovation and problem-solving function is becoming so dominant, and that the general conditions for deciding genuinely and fully on one's own research agenda have greatly diminished in academia, then the critical function of scholars will increasingly try to find its way out of academia. New forms of research and scholarship will emerge outside the universities, if the universities continue to being transformed into hypercompetitive organisations that in a hyper-efficient manner try to turn public research funds into innovations and solutions to problems. The University will effectively change into the R&D department for the country and our economy. The critical research will move to organisations engaged in investigative journalism, or will be taken up by non-fiction writers. This would be undesirable, since as Robert Hutchins argues convincingly, the university has this special

¹⁷ For a recent documented case in Austria, see <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000107797902/wenn-professoren-mundtot-gemacht-werden>

protected role to perform this critical research, and it is also crucial in the teaching and education of students. Hence, we must stand up for academic staff to be able to keep performing the critical role of the university.

The fact that the Minister wants to strengthen the university's innovation function at the expense of its critical function is well illustrated by her recent decision to transfer some 70 million euros, mainly from the social sciences and humanities, to the natural sciences and technical sciences. Now, it is not the case that the critical function of the university is a prerogative or the exclusive task of the humanities and social sciences, and that it is absent in the natural and engineering sciences. This is a stereotype that is often heard, but it is false. For one thing, all academic disciplines produce knowledge that lead to innovations and problem solving. Scholarship from the humanities and social sciences has also led to innovations that have great economic impact. For example, philosophy, in particular logic, has made a seminal contribution to the development of computer languages; art historians and cultural scholars provide crucial input to the economic successes of the cultural industry, for example through their work in the museums; and labour sociologists and psychologists develop strategies to avoid productivity losses in the workplace. And the stereotype is also not true as it applies to the natural and technical sciences. There are plenty of natural scientists and engineers who ask questions that entail social critique and analysis, for example when architects critique current architectural practices for not being equally accommodating to people with different physical and sensory abilities and needs.

But while the simplistic stereotype must be resisted, it is nevertheless the case that the humanities and social sciences are *more likely* to produce research that amounts to social criticism, in comparison with the natural and technical sciences. So if the minister of higher education and sciences decides that it is a good policy to shift a significant amount of funds, that are very badly needed, from the humanities and social sciences, than the academic disciplines that are making, in relative terms, the greatest contribution to the university's critical function will be weakened, while the sciences and universities that are relatively the most focused on innovation will be strengthened. The poor conditions for engaging in societal critique, and to properly perform the duty of being a watchdog for society, are further deteriorated.

Moreover, apart from this material harm, there is also the harm that this policy causes in terms of the attitudes it conveys towards this critical function of the universities.¹⁸ The Minister and this government are essentially saying that the critical function of the universities is not very important, or at least that this critical function can to some extent be sacrificed in order to strengthen the innovation and problem-solving function.

I come to my conclusion.

What should the university do in order to protect liberal democracies? It should explain why we have liberal democracies. It should provide critical commentary on politicians, citizens, journalists, and anybody else, who attacks the institutions that are part of the division of power in liberal democracies. Professors should write books and blogs, and explain on television and radio how propaganda or dehumanization works, or how a discourse that divides the citizens of that nation in two groups is a tactic that belongs to the set of mechanisms that weakens liberal democracies and moves us into the direction of authoritarian regimes. Professors should write books and blogs, and explain on television and radio how framing works, which is knowledge that ordinary citizens can apply to analyse political discourse not just by politicians but also by opinion leaders taking part in and shaping public debates. Professors should write op-ed pieces criticizing existing public institutions, and proposing how they could be improved. And we could go on and on and on.

The universities serve many functions, not just being a watchdog for liberal democracies. We should also care about and protect our universities because they are like a public good, that is, a place where knowledge is created that everyone should be able to access, for all future generations. So we have reasons enough to protect our universities, to cherish them, to fund them so that they can enact all their functions. We should warn ourselves not to reduce the role of the universities in democracies to innovation and problem solving. Because that's not the only reason why we have universities.

¹⁸ On how policies and institutions can convey morally troubling attitudes, see, e.g., Christian Schemmel (2011) 'Distributive and relational equality', *Politics, Philosophy and Economics*, 11(2), pp 123-148.