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THE UNIVERSITY BETWEEN AUTONOMY, POLITICAL PRESSURE, AND INSTITUTIONAL ETHICS

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Abstract: *For a long time, the university has been perceived as a bastion of free thought, intellectual autonomy, and critical formation. In today's context, however, this image is challenged by a reality dominated by political pressure, performance metrics, the commercialization of knowledge, and the erosion of academic ethics. This article explores the nature of this systemic crisis by analyzing the tense relationship between university autonomy, institutional ethics, and the political function of the university. It examines the subtle mechanisms of intellectual conformism, the illusion of academic neutrality, and the symbolic complicity of silence. In contrast, the study identifies emerging forms of ethical resistance, practices of epistemic insubordination, and possible directions for rehumanizing the academic space. The university is thus reconfigured not as a neutral space, but as an essential political actor, capable of defending not only truth but democracy itself.*

Keywords: *university autonomy; academic ethics; critical thinking; neoliberalism; intellectual resistance; strategic conformism; political actor; cultural hegemony; plagiarism; democratic education.*

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UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY: BETWEEN THE MYTH OF FREEDOM AND THE REALITY OF OBEDIENCE

Modern universities legitimize themselves through a seductive promise: autonomy—a kind of sovereignty if we were to compare it to that of states. It is assumed that beyond their gates, thought is free, research unrestrained, and dialogue protected from any external interference. But autonomy, like democracy or truth, works better as an ideal than as a reality.

In the Romanian context, the contrast between ideal and practice is stark. Although the law guarantees university autonomy, reality is shaped by budgetary constraints, bureaucratic regulations, and ideological pressures. University autonomy implies the ability of institutions to manage their resources, set strategic priorities, and determine their educational and research directions without

external political or ideological interference. In theory, the university is free. In practice, it is increasingly conditioned.

There is no shortage of declarations of intent. However, in Romania, autonomy remains often only partially realized. Universities depend on public funding, and the allocation of resources is not based solely on performance criteria, but also on political considerations, ideological loyalties, or influence networks. "University autonomy is limited as long as institutions depend on a funder who can annually decide on the amounts allocated and favor or disadvantage universities through these allocations" (Purec, 2019, pp. 6–7).

This phenomenon is not isolated. At the European level, the report coordinated by Estermann and colleagues (2011, p. 8) shows that "a number of systems still offer very limited autonomy to universities, thereby restricting their performance." Often, formal autonomy is accompanied by strict control mechanisms. A form of "performative autonomy" emerges, in which freedom of decision is replaced by the freedom to comply with indicators.

Thus, autonomy becomes decorative—a myth invoked in speeches but emptied of content in practice. The more legislation proclaims academic freedom, the more intrusive control mechanisms become. The university turns into an institution that simulates autonomy, but practices it only within the margins of institutional survival.

The pressure is not only financial. It is also epistemic. Governments reshape university curricula not for academic reasons, but for ideological ones. Gender studies courses are eliminated or marginalized. History is rewritten according to national needs. Philosophy becomes a non-productive relic. The debate on academic freedom and university autonomy is reignited both in authoritarian regimes and in democratic nations. In a world where performance is measured in points and truth in indexing, autonomy becomes a refined form of submission.

But the most subtle loss of autonomy is cultural. Academic freedom no longer needs to be prohibited—it is enough for it to become irrelevant. Underfunding directly affects the university's capacity to define its own priorities. The appearance of institutional control is maintained, but choices are dictated by a lack of resources.

True autonomy would mean not only the freedom to manage budgets but also the power to think critically, to form autonomous citizens, and to protect uncomfortable ideas. In the absence of these functions, the university may survive—but it will no longer be alive.

UNIVERSITY ETHICS AND THE CULTURE OF CONFORMISM: HOLLOW RITUALS IN A DECREPIT TEMPLE

In the modern mythology of the university, academic ethics is regarded as an unshakable virtue—a sacred code that everyone respects, at least outwardly. At the opening of each academic year, speeches are given about truth, integrity, and excellence. Yet behind these rituals, the moral reality of academic life is slowly but steadily deteriorating.

In Romania—and not only there—university ethics is no longer a weapon against imposture but rather an administrative decoration. Plagiarism, once a capital sin in the intellectual world, has become a manageable deviation, dealt with by loyal committees or strategic silence among colleagues. Academic fraud is no longer an exception but a systemic expression of a culture built on simulation and conformism.

This erosion is not orchestrated by a malevolent conspiracy but results from a more insidious mechanism: performance without meaning. In a culture where the value of knowledge is measured in citations, scores, and impact factors, truth becomes secondary. What matters is ticking boxes. Publishing. Being visible. "Publish or perish" is no longer just a motto—it is a rule of survival.

Slaughter and Rhoades (2004, p. 3) warn that "academic capitalism" has produced a new type of researcher: the career manager.

Professors and researchers have become accountants of their own visibility. Articles are written that change nothing but pass peer review. Conferences are organized that provoke no real debate but yield ranking points. Ethics becomes procedural: it doesn't matter whether you lied—only whether you filled out the form correctly.

In such a climate, fraud is no longer scandalous. It is banal. There is no need for censorship—self-censorship becomes internalized. The young university assistant quickly learns that uncomfortable questions are counterproductive. Challenging the system means losing points. Over time, the entire academic community begins to believe this normality is natural.

What results is a distorted form of ethics—one in which integrity is equated with compliance. The more universities are constrained by performative accountability regimes, the more autonomy becomes a fiction. In this sense, the code of ethics is no longer a moral compass but a survival strategy.

In such a context, plagiarism assumes a paradoxical function: it becomes not only an offense but also a tool for settling scores. When someone becomes inconvenient, a plagiarism accusation becomes the most efficient means of symbolic annihilation. The public, weary and disillusioned, no longer seeks truth but the spectacle of shame. Once the label is applied, reputation cannot be restored.

Solutions exist, but they require a paradigm shift. Preventing plagiarism should not rely on witch hunts but on detection systems integrated into the architecture of scientific publishing—just as Spotify or YouTube automatically detect and block duplicated content. The problem is not only moral but institutional. True academic ethics does not rely on fear or shame but on systems that make intellectual corruption structurally impossible. We don't need new moral tribunals, but a framework in which fraud is eliminated by design. In this model, integrity is not a heroic choice but a natural consequence of how the system operates.

Until then, the university remains trapped in a tragic paradox: it claims to be a beacon of truth but shines ever more dimly. It teaches ethics but does not practice it. It demands integrity but rewards adaptation. When the entire academic community knows how to simulate but no longer dares to challenge, we are not facing an ethical decline—we are witnessing the slow death of free thought.

THE UNIVERSITY AS A POLITICAL ACTOR: SILENCE THAT LEGITIMIZES POWER

The university has long been portrayed as a citadel above the city, a neutral structure that observes, analyzes, but does not intervene. Like an astronomical observatory of society—cold, lucid, independent. But this image is a comforting illusion. In reality, the university has never been neutral. And where it claims neutrality, it legitimizes—through silence—the existing order.

The university produces elites, validates truths, and grants authority to scientific discourse. It is, as Gramsci would put it, an instrument of cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1971). Controlling the university means controlling not only the present but also the future: ideas, values, and legitimacy criteria. No political power is unaware of this function. That is why the university is a battlefield of symbolic struggle—even if the weapons are grants, curricula, and regulations, not bullets.

To say the university is "apolitical" is to forget that the great oppressive systems of history—colonialism, racism, neoliberalism—were justified and normalized in lecture halls. Anthropology legitimized imperialism, biology classified races, economics praised free markets, and theology

sanctified patriarchy. Truth was not merely sought in universities—it was produced in accordance with power relations.

Even today, university silence is rarely neutral. It is often a refined form of complicity. Enyedi (2020, p. 114) shows how, in Hungary, universities passively witnessed the Orbán regime's illiberal drift, culminating in the exile of Central European University. Not out of fear, but out of habituation. In Romania, the academic response to pivotal democratic moments—such as Emergency Ordinance 13—was more exceptional than systemic.

This passivity is no accident. It is cultivated through the very structure of the contemporary university. Competitive funding, constant evaluation, and dependence on grants—all these discourage uncomfortable positions. A professor may quote Kant or Habermas, but is not encouraged to apply them to current policies. Doing philosophy is acceptable; moral opposition is dangerous.

But neutrality itself is a political choice. When the university accepts, without protest, funding cuts, the elimination of critical disciplines, or ideological infiltration, it does not rise above politics—it silently participates in shaping the dominant order. For example, the banning of gender studies in Hungary was possible not because universities were attacked head-on, but because they failed to react.

The curriculum is an ideological map. What is taught, what is excluded, what is promoted—all reflect a distribution of symbolic power. Bourdieu (1988) called this process "symbolic violence": a form of domination that operates through tacit acceptance, not coercion.

In this sense, the university is inevitably political. Not because it supports a party or doctrine, but because it holds the unique power to decide what is "scientific," "true," or "valid." In a post-truth world, this function becomes even more crucial. When governments speak of "alternative facts," the university must decide whether to remain silent or to respond.

There is, however, another path. The university can return to what it once was in its moments of glory: a space of intellectual resistance. A critical public sphere (Habermas, 1991), capable of forming conscious citizens—not just efficient professionals. It can speak, not in the name of a party, but in the name of lucidity.

But to do so, it must renounce the myth of neutrality and embrace its real condition: that of a political actor. Not partisan, but critical. Not activist, but a conscience. Because in an age where silence is golden for power, the only form of honesty is voice.

DIRECTIONS OF RESISTANCE: BETWEEN THE POSSIBLE AND THE NECESSARY

Systems do not collapse overnight. They first begin to crack silently, along fractures that go unnoticed on television and unrecorded in performance charts. And it is there, in the quiet of those fractures, that resistance emerges. Not heroic resistance, but organic. Not in the streets, but in libraries. Not with banners, but with questions.

In an academic ecosystem suffocated by metrics and simulation, true resistance is not shouted—it is meaningfully silent. It is the slowness of a professor who prefers commenting on Spinoza rather than ticking boxes for "transversal competencies." It is a researcher's refusal to engage in mutual citation networks. It is a faculty's decision to preserve courses in political philosophy despite market-driven pressures. This resistance is what Kezar (2018, p. 43) calls an "ethical mutation": a quiet shift that undermines the foundations of an otherwise stable structure.

In some corners of the academic world, forms of collective insubordination are beginning to take shape. Professors who refuse to assess students by mechanical criteria. Researchers who reject toxic funding. Communities that create independent journals and informal networks for knowledge

dissemination. These do not replace the system but subtly alter its inner structure—like a new genetic code. As Giroux (2014, p. 62) notes, "spaces of critical and nonconformist education are essential for the revitalization of democracy."

In these enclaves, the goal is no longer excellence but meaning. Not indexation, but understanding. Here, a form of academic ethics is cultivated—one that cannot be codified or scored: the choice to speak when all are silent, and to remain silent when all are chanting slogans. It is not a revolution, but a form of persistence.

Nussbaum (2010, p. 84) argues that democracy needs people capable of thinking independently, of empathizing, and of resisting. And the university—if it does not wish to become an intellectual shopping mall—must relearn how to form such individuals. In this sense, developing interdisciplinary courses, engaging in community projects, and fostering dialogue between science, art, and morality are not mere curricular innovations, but gestures of rehumanizing education.

But such changes do not come from above. They are not born in deans' offices, but in the dimly lit workspaces of professors who still believe the university is not about efficiency, but about humanity. Real ethics cannot be imposed. It is transmitted by example. And in times dominated by conformity, courage does not necessarily mean denunciation. Sometimes, it simply means carrying on.

Ultimately, the deepest form of resistance is ontological. The university must remember why it exists. Not to confer degrees, but to keep alive the memory that truth matters. Not to deliver "innovation," but to question the world. Not to conform to reality, but to confront it.

CONCLUSION

The university is no longer what it claims to be. It has become an institution wearing the mask of freedom within a framework of control—invoking autonomy while applying docility, celebrating ethics while rewarding adaptation. Instead of a temple of free thought, we now have a certification center for marketable competencies. Instead of a laboratory of truth, a bureaucratic survival incubator. What has been lost is not only autonomy but the very meaning of the university's existence.

This decline was not caused by a catastrophe but by a silent accumulation of compromises: metrics over ideas, conformity over critique, management over thinking. The university has reshaped itself in the image of the market and the interests of the state, losing precisely what made it unique: the vocation to question the world rather than replicate its forms.

Yet there is still hope. Not in spectacular reforms, but in slow mutations. In the refusal to simulate. In the courage to ask impossible questions. In the creation of enclaves of meaning, where thinking is not subordinated to performance. True transformation does not come from the top but from the margins—not through directives, but through everyday gestures of lucid insubordination.

In an age when truth is relativized, knowledge is managed by algorithms, and politics reduced to spectacle, the university may be the last institution with the moral, intellectual, and symbolic resources to defend clarity of thought. But to fulfill this role, it must relinquish the myth of neutrality and accept what it is: a political actor, a critical conscience, a space where humanity reflects upon itself.

The university need not be on the left or right. It must stand in front—in front of lies, in front of manipulation, in front of imposture. Because if it can no longer do that, the diploma becomes not proof of knowledge, but a relic of a past when thinking still mattered.

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