1. *Social Freedom as the Purpose of the Modern University*

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Abstract: What is the fundamental purpose that justifies the existence of the modern university? The answer proposed in this essay is the promotion of social freedom. The essay begins by distinguishing social freedom from negative freedom and reflective freedom along the lines proposed by other theorists of social freedom, such as Frederick Neuhouser and Axel Honneth. After noting the need for a more developed account of the university than has so far been provided by these other theorists, the essay analyses the various dimensions in which universities have, at their best, promoted social freedom. The essay then explains why it is through the promotion of social, as distinct from negative or reflective freedom, that universities fulfil their purpose. It concludes with some reflections on how this understanding of the purpose of the university fits an "immanent" model of social criticism.

Keywords: purpose of the modern university, theories of freedom, social freedom, impact of research, immanent criticism

1. *Introduction: Justifying Universities*

Universities have had to get used to justifying themselves. For some time now, the dominant mode in which they have had to do this is by participation in

audits.[1] It is predominantly by participating in audits of their service delivery and financial sustainability that universities nowadays show themselves ready for justification – as candidates, as it were, for a justified existence – and it is by their performance in those audits that they prove or fail to prove their worth. This context of justification applies not only to particular universities, but also to the university as an institutional form. The university, understood as a fully or partially self-governing institution of learning, scholarship and research whose history stretches back to the self-governing institutions of learning and scholarship established in medieval Europe, is no longer considered to be *exempt* from justification: like any other provider of services, it must prove its worth and do so in accordance with generally accepted economic and financial norms. The dominant mode in which justification of the university as an institution proceeds today is that the claim to justification is challenged in terms of economic cost, and an attempt to redeem the claim is made in terms of overriding economic benefits or long-term "value for money."

As many commentators have observed, there is something fundamentally unsatisfactory about debates that follow this pattern.[2] One can accept that a university should be able to justify its costs without supposing that a university should be able to justify its existence by way of a cost-benefit analysis, and this for at least two basic reasons. First, economic modelling of the value realized by universities makes it appear as if the *aspect* under which the activities are viewed – the costs incurred and their returns – were the *constitutive goal* of those activities, which typically it is not. Second, the cost-effectiveness mode of justification is question-begging. For once this form of justification is given, one can always ask a further question about the worth of the purpose served by cost-effectiveness or the addition of economic value. The economic viability of a university, or its net contribution to economic output, is not self-justifying: it does not bring the chain of justification to an end. So, even

[1] Chris Shore and Susan Wright, "Audit Culture Revisited: Rankings, Ratings and the Reassembling of Society," *Cultural Anthropology* 56, no. 3 (2015): 421–444.

[2] Tony Coady (ed.), *Why Universities Matter: A Conversation about Values, Means and Directions* (St Leonards NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2000); Thomas Docherty, *For the University: Democracy and the Future of the Institution* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011); Stefan Collini, *What Are Universities For?* (London: Penguin, 2012); Stefan Collini, *Speaking of Universities* (London: Verso, 2017); Henry A. Giroux, *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014); Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

if universities were able to justify themselves in economic or monetary terms, that would not suffice to justify their existence.

What would suffice as a justification? It would be the realization or promotion of a value the worth of which cannot reasonably be questioned, and which thus has the status of a self-justifying value. In modern societies, the value that comes closest to having this status is *freedom*. This understanding of freedom as a self-justifying norm – indeed as the "self-defining" norm of modern societies[3] – is shared by many modern philosophers, including Locke, Rousseau, Kant, and especially Hegel. In Hegel's formulation, the key institutions of modern society are not just contingently answerable to a norm of freedom: they are *constituted* by their answerability to that norm. They owe their existence, on Hegel's view, to their claim to actualize freedom (embody "spirit") effectively, even if in practice that claim is never fully redeemed.[4] But this internal relationship between the institutions characteristic of modernity and freedom will be missed, Hegel argued, if we understand freedom too narrowly: either as an individual's legally enshrined (but "abstract") right to live as they wish without outside interference, on the one hand; or an individual's right to live in accordance with their own reflectively reached judgements and to pursue their own rational plan of life, on the other. For Hegel, we must be able to conceive of freedom not just in its *negative* and *reflective* dimensions, as he believed his predecessors such as Locke and Kant did, but also, and most crucially, in its *social* dimension.

If Hegel was basically right, and modern institutions generally are accountable to a norm of social freedom, shouldn't we be thinking of the modern university as also accountable to that norm? If we do think of the university that way, as having the promotion of social freedom as its fundamental purpose, which features of it come to the fore and which become less salient? And as universities change, which changes should be seen as bringing gains in social freedom – gains that mean the university is serving its fundamental purpose better – and which as bringing losses?

The central thesis to be advanced in this essay is that social freedom is the fundamental norm by reference to which modern universities owe their

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[3] Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 154–166.

[4] G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Frederick Neuhouser, *Foundations of Hegel's Social Theory: Actualizing Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Axel Honneth, *Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*, trans. Joseph Ganahl (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

justification. It is by realizing or promoting social freedom that universities fulfil their underlying purpose. We begin with a sketch of Hegel's concept of social freedom that makes it at least plausible to suppose that the dominant institutions of modern society in general are accountable to a norm of social freedom (section 2). We limit ourselves here to the concept of social freedom as elaborated in recent attempts at retrieving Hegel's insights and applying them to contemporary societies.[5] Honneth's work is particularly important for us because it provides not only an account of social freedom, but also a broader account of the normative basis of social criticism and the tasks of a critical theory of society, which we take to be instructive for criticism and justification of the modern university. However, Honneth himself has not considered what might be at stake in such criticism and justification, and his reconstruction of the claim of modern institutions to actualize social freedom does not mention universities at all. We take a brief look at what the literature on social freedom does have to say about education (section 3), before moving on to offer our own account of how universities function to realize and promote social freedom (section 4). We then explain why it is through the realization and promotion of social, as distinct from negative or reflective freedom, that universities fulfil their purpose (section 5), and we conclude with some brief remarks on how this understanding of the purpose of the university yields an "internal" form of social criticism.

2. *Three Kinds of Freedom: Negative, Reflective, and Social*

The idea that the characteristic institutions of modernity owe their legitimacy to the freedoms they protect or realize has a long history. In its classical liberal form, such as in Locke's contract theory, the freedom these institutions serve to protect is essentially pre-political.[6] In the "state of nature" – that is, prior to the existence of political society – human beings enjoy an "original" or "natural" freedom to live how and where they choose, to own and exchange property, and to pursue happiness guided by the religion of their choice. The purpose of political institutions is essentially to make these freedoms less precarious than they would be in a state of nature. It is the success of such

[5] Neuhouser, *Foundations of Hegel's Social Theory*; Honneth, *Freedom's Right*. See also Axel Honneth, "Three, Not Two, Concepts of Liberty: A Proposal to Enlarge Our Moral Self-Understanding" in *Hegel on Philosophy in History*, ed. Rachel Zuckert and James Kreines (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 177–192.

[6] John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, ed. C.B. Macpherson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980).

institutions in this respect that justifies them, and in failing in it they lose their legitimacy.

Note that, on this view, freedom is only contingently connected to the social and political institutions that serve to protect it. In the classical liberal view, it is each individual's natural right to live as they wish, and the state protects that pre-existing right by enshrining it in law. Individuals in society are considered to be equal bearers of those legal rights, such as rights of movement, property rights, and rights of religious expression, which it is the purpose and duty of the state to uphold. To fulfil this purpose, the state must enforce the law, but it should not otherwise interfere in people's lives or their pursuits of happiness, except in extreme circumstances such as war. It is for this reason that the kind of freedom at stake here can be called "negative"[7]: we judge a person's freedom by the extent to which there are no external impediments preventing that person from pursuing whatever desires and wishes they happen to have. Institutions serve freedom simply by allowing people to pursue the desires and wishes they already voluntarily act and interact upon, as distinct from serving it by "positively" directing or shaping such action and interaction. On this view, it is by enabling such action and interaction to proceed *unhindered* that institutions also serve justice. For modern libertarians and neo-liberals, the main threats to freedom, and main purveyors of injustice, are those institutions that seek to "regulate" the outcome of the voluntary interactions that make up a free market, such as those that characterize an interventionist welfare state.[8]

One of the main drawbacks with this conception of freedom is that it fails to make sense of the possibility that desires and wishes can themselves be sources of unfreedom. The things a person wants can, surely, be the very things that dominate them and stop them being free, as many cases of addiction attest. This suggests there is a kind of freedom that consists not so much in the absence of constraint in pursuing one's desires, as in having desires of a certain sort, in desiring the right way, or in having a certain relation to one's desires. The thought that freedom is essentially a matter of the *quality* of will, rather than absence of an external impediment to its satisfaction, is central to Rousseau's and Kant's theories of freedom.

In Kant's theory, freedom requires an autonomous will: it is by acting from motives I can reflectively endorse as a rational agent that I become a free,

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[7] Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Liberty*, 2nd ed., ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 166–217.

[8] Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1977); Friedrich Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

which is to say autonomous, agent. For Rousseau, freedom requires recovery from artificial and corrupted desire, the attainment of an inner authenticity, and an attunement with the authentic will of a people. For both Rousseau and Kant, it is above all the shape of the will that counts, a shape it is within human powers to do something about. Indeed, the capacity for standing back from the will as one finds it, for judging and thereby reshaping the desires on which one acts, is considered (by Kant at least) the distinctive human power, the power in virtue of which each human being possesses a distinctive dignity. A just society, from this perspective, is one in which each individual member is able to exercise the capacity for reflective freedom that provides the basis of their human dignity. Unjust societies, by contrast, deprive some of their members of this dignity either by failing to recognize their capacity for self-legislation or by excluding them from opportunities to develop this capacity. For many contemporary cosmopolitan and liberal-egalitarian theorists influenced by Kant, such is the pattern of injustice suffered by those who, on the basis of their gender, race, or ethnicity, are deemed to lack a capacity for self-legislation and fully-fledged autonomy.[9]

The idea of reflective freedom certainly captures something important about the modern understanding of freedom that is missing in the negative conception. But it is defective in the view of those who invoke a contrasting notion of social freedom, given its separation of the bare capacity for self-legislation that lies within each person and the actual social contexts in which people have to act. This is certainly how it seemed to Hegel. As he pointed out, a reflexively free will merely has the potential for freedom: as with negative freedom, it is only contingently connected to the forms of life that actualize this potential. Actual or concrete freedom for an individual depends on the availability of practical options in society that align with the content of the individual's self-legislating will. In other words, those things we rationally and therefore autonomously want, the objects of desires we reflectively endorse, must be available and attainable by us in real life, if that reflective freedom is to really matter. It is the freedom enjoyed by actual participation in society, by autonomy achieved in and through the fulfilment of social roles and participation in social relationships, that we are calling social freedom. Social freedom thus has both a subjective component, associated with self-determining individual wills, and an objective component, associated with historically

[9] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971); Carol Hay, *Kantianism, Liberalism and Feminism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Thomas E. Hill Jr. and Bernard Boxill, "Kant and Race" in *Race and Racism*, ed. Bernard Boxill (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 448–472.

established forms of social relationship and institutions that are beyond the direct control of individuals.

What are these historically objective forms? For Hegel, the key ones are the family, civil society (the market system of production, consumption, and broadly speaking public welfare), and the state.[10] Honneth gives a historical reconstruction of how these forms have evolved and mutated since Hegel's time, amending the Hegelian theory of "objective spirit" in the process.[11]

For Honneth, the family belongs with friendship as a sphere of personal relationships in which a particular norm of recognition holds sway: mutual love or care for the other in their particularity. The crucial point for the theory of social freedom is that the sphere of personal relationships is an ethical sphere, part of the fabric of ethical life, in which the expression of social freedom is at stake. The history of this sphere can thus be traced as one of gains and losses in social freedom. Developments that enable more personal autonomy to be found in family roles and relationships count as gains, but so crucially do those that bring more "co-determination" to the roles and relationships, that is, cooperation between the parties understood as equals. The freedom enjoyed in such relationships is that of a "we" not just an aggregate of "I"s.[12] In contrast to such gains, losses of social freedom occur when participation in the relationships or performance of the role can only be achieved by sacrificing one's autonomy, by assuming an alien identity, by enforced subordination under another, or by the arbitrary exclusion of whole groups from the major institutions of the sphere. An example of a gain in social freedom in the personal sphere would thus be equal marriage (inclusion of members of a previously excluded group); an example of a loss would be a rise in family violence or the disintegration of a solidaristic sense of "we" between life partners.

The world of (paid and unpaid) work provides another key sphere where social freedom is at stake. Here too participation in the sphere brings with it a particular form of recognition. Contribution to the social effort through work (especially paid work) gives one "standing," status as someone who counts, and this is an important source of self-esteem and self-respect in modern societies (witness the appreciation shown to health workers during the COVID-19 pandemic). The theory of social freedom (in the form developed by Hegel and Honneth which we are reconstructing here) rejects the view that the sphere of work, even when understood as the labour market,

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[10] Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*.

[11] Honneth, *Freedom's Right*.

[12] Axel Honneth, *The I in We: Studies in the Theory of Recognition* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012).

is merely a realm of economic transactions, dictated solely by instrumental rationality. Rather, work is understood as another sphere of ethical life, as a source of roles and relationships that can – and in many cases does – give expression to social freedom. In those cases where it does, the worker can express her particular talents and abilities in her work, is recognised for her achievements, and has some say, along with her colleagues, in how the work is done and what it is done for. In other words, work provides a locus of social freedom when guided by a democratic and cooperative ethos. Work falls short as a site of social freedom, on the other hand, when it requires self-alienation, subordination to the arbitrary rule of bosses, enforced performance of degrading tasks, or lack of recognition for a worker's actual contribution, including by inadequate or (as is widely the case between men and women) unequal remuneration.[13]

Just as we can gain or lose social freedom in our role as family members, friends, workers, and consumers, we can also gain or lose it as citizens. We gain it when, for example, we are able to take part in meaningful and open discussion with our fellow citizens about the common good, when we have access to a democratically structured public sphere, and when we are able to give meaningful expression to our autonomous wills when voting in government elections. Our social freedom as citizens is diminished, by contrast, when the public sphere is rigged by corporate interests, corrupted by fake news, closed to opposing opinions, and when candidacy for election to government is a prerogative of the super-rich and privileged.

Three further points of clarification about these three kinds of freedom are worth making. First, the social freedoms enjoyed by family members, friends, workers, consumers, and citizens do not replace their negative and reflective freedoms. Rather they are to be thought of as actualizations of a potential contained in those other kinds of freedom. Second, while the spheres of social freedom are in one sense given, they are not fixed. They are given in the sense that they confront the individual as having a reality and authority of their own. But they are not fixed in the sense of being immune from criticism and change. A sphere of action is not a locus of social freedom once and for all. As already implied, spheres of action can and typically do undergo gains and losses in the social freedom they provide, and they might even lose the capacity to realize social freedom altogether. If, following Honneth's analysis, we take

[13] Nicholas H. Smith, "Work as a Realm of Social Freedom" in *The Politics and Ethics of Contemporary Work: Whither Work?*, ed. Keith Breen and Jean-Philippe Deranty (London: Routledge, 2022), 16–30.

a long-term historical perspective on the ways these spheres have developed in modern democratic societies, it becomes plausible to view each of them as having gained in social freedom in key respects, particularly in becoming more sensitive to the reciprocal needs of formerly excluded others. However fragile and easily reversible these achievements may be (especially when viewed in the short-term), the crucial point is that expectations and demands for greater levels of democratic inclusion have become *constitutive* for these spheres of modern life.

This leads to the third point to be clear upon: insofar as it is framed by the theory of social freedom, criticism of the institutions that make up these spheres does not appeal to ideals that are fine "in theory" but difficult or impossible to put into practice. Rather, such criticism draws on standards that are internal to the justification of the institutions themselves. To say of a sphere of action that it has become what it is on account of the social freedom it claims to realize is not to inure it from justification: on the contrary, it is to invite critical reflection on the relation between the constitutive norm and the normatively constituted reality. The norm appealed to in such criticism is not arbitrary, for the norm is the very feature in virtue of which the dominant institutions of that sphere have their claim on our allegiance. The idea is not that it would be good if we could shape our institutions to deliver social freedom and be more democratic, but rather that we would not even have the set of institutions we do have had they not been established, through historical struggles, to bring about a democratic form of ethical life. These are not commitments that we merely ought to have or would have in an ideal world; rather they are the ethical norms to which we are already actually committed.

The theory of social freedom, and its associated conception of internal or "immanent" criticism, gives us the conceptual framework we think we need for analysing the claim to justification of the modern university.[14] But before we turn to that analysis, we should first consider the analyses that other theorists of social freedom have offered.

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[14] We do not, of course, take the sketch of the general theory of social freedom just provided to amount to a justification of this theory. Much more argument than we can provide here would be needed for that purpose. But for the purpose of our argument in this essay, it suffices to show that the Hegelian conceptual framework is plausible and has advantages over the main rival theories of freedom, theories that provide alternative conceptual frameworks for justifying universities.

3. Education in the Theory of Social Freedom

Neither Neuhouser nor Honneth mention universities in their accounts of social freedom. The closest we get in Neuhouser's account is a discussion of Hegel's idea of education (*Bildung*).[15] Neuhouser rightly draws attention to the emphasis Hegel gives to the educational or formative effect of participation in the various spheres of action. The family is an obvious context of self-formation and education, especially in early life. But work also has this educative function: it has an important role in the shaping of a rational will. It is also by active participation in the public sphere, by listening to and arguing with others about matters of public concern, that we learn how to be good citizens. These aspects of Hegel's social theory all remain relevant for the education or formation (*Bildung*) of the subjects of contemporary democratic societies. But what is missing is any discussion of education as a context of action in its own right. *Educational institutions*, institutions whose specific purpose it is to educate, do not feature at all, not even schools. This is a curious and unfortunate omission (in both Hegel's theory and Neuhouser's defence of it) given the unquestionable importance of schooling, professional colleges, universities and other educational institutions in the reproduction of modern societies and their specific forms of ethical life.[16]

Honneth's normative reconstruction of the key institutions of modern society is also guilty of this omission.[17] Elsewhere, however, Honneth himself laments the neglect of childhood education as a theme in recent political theory.[18] He attributes this neglect to a certain cultural conservatism, on the one hand, according to which schools as public institutions can only ever play a minor role in children's ethical formation, one subordinate to that of families and religious communities; and on the other hand, to a certain interpretation of the principle of "liberal neutrality," according to which the liberal democratic state should not promote or inculcate particular ethical values. Honneth takes both reasons to be misplaced: schools remain a crucial context of ethical learning and the state has a responsibility to ensure that in the

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[15] Neuhouser, *Foundations of Hegel's Social Theory*, 148–165.

[16] The problematic absence of any account of school education in Hegel and Honneth is also discussed in Jenn Dum and Robert Guay, "Hegel and Honneth's Theoretical Deficit: Education, Social Freedom and the Institutions of Modern Life," *Hegel Bulletin* 38, no. 2 (2017): 293–317.

[17] Honneth, *Freedom's Right*.

[18] Axel Honneth, "Education and the Democratic Public Sphere. A Neglected Chapter of Political Philosophy," in *Recognition and Freedom*, ed. Jonas Jakobsen and Odin Lysaker (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 17–32.

course of that learning the basic values of liberal democracy are passed on and renewed in the next generation. Honneth reminds us that this "internal relation" between public schooling and democracy was seen by earlier political theorists, Kant, Dewey and Durkheim chief among them.

The key point they made, and which Honneth urges us to re-articulate and re-emphasise today, is that good democracies need good citizens, and good citizens need good public schools. Kant saw that to become a good citizen one must have the basic self-confidence to speak with one's own voice on public matters, a confidence nurtured as a child through the recognition of one's individual capacities in school learning. Even the teaching and learning of technical skills, in Kant's view, serves this more basic pedagogical purpose: to prepare children for their future role as citizens of the republic. But it is to Durkheim and Dewey (on Honneth's reading) that we owe the thought that this preparation involves an initiation into joint, cooperative activity – the kind of activity typical of democratic decision-making itself. So whereas for Kant public schools serve the republic by equipping each individual (male) child with the self-respect and self-esteem they will later need when acquitting their responsibilities as individual citizens of the republic, for Durkheim and Dewey they serve it by habituating the child into practices of communal inquiry, cooperative problem-solving, and collective decision-making that they will encounter later in life as citizens in the democratic public sphere.

Although Honneth does not himself put it this way, we could say that the "Kant view" summarized above presents the purpose of public schools as preparing children for citizenship by fostering their capacity for reflective freedom, whereas the "Durkheim-Dewey view" presents the purpose of public schools as preparing children for citizenship by fostering their capacity for social freedom. Once we do put the difference that way, then Honneth's sketch of the "Durkheim-Dewey" view of school education offers us a hint of what a social freedom view of universities might look like. But only a partial hint. For one thing, the function performed by universities, while continuous with that performed by schools, is in important respects distinct: it concerns the education of adults not children, the level of education is obviously higher, and it typically also involves both the production of scholarship and scientific research and a complex array of partnerships with other organisations to achieve impact informed by that research. For another thing, the Durkheim-Dewey view of the public school is focused exclusively on preparing the child for the role of public *citizen*, of citizenship in a democratic public sphere. This is indeed a crucial context of social freedom, but not the only one. If the university is to serve effectively in the promotion of social freedom, it should serve social freedom in each of the three spheres of action

we considered above, in its research and external engagement as well as its teaching. Let us now consider how it might do this.

4. The University and the Promotion of Social Freedom

To say of the modern university that it functions to promote social freedom is to say this: that in its core activities of teaching and learning, it serves to enable its students to realise their individual autonomy in their contributions to the key spheres of social action; and in its core activities of scholarship, research and engagement, it serves to enable all members of society to realize their individual autonomy in that way. In both these respects, the modern university fulfils its purpose by strengthening the fabric of democratic life. Arguments about the justification of the modern university, in their normative fundamentals, boil down to arguments about the success or failure of the university in fulfilling this function. The fabric of democratic life is strengthened by enabling individuals to be autonomous in their *everyday social relationships*, such as they have when forming a family and maintaining a household, when making and keeping friends, in their work and professional life, in their participation in a local community, and in fulfilling their duties as citizens. The purpose of the modern university, on this view, is to promote freedom in social *contribution* – *social* freedom – not just for a few but for all. Let us consider first how it achieves this for its students, and then the broader community in which it is embedded.

From the perspective of the university student and prospective graduate, their university education is a means to social freedom in developing their potential for autonomous participation in each of the three key spheres of social action. This means that in their university studies, students should be developing their capacity for independent judgement and creativity – attributes crucial for reflective autonomy – not simply for its own sake, but to enable them to contribute to democratic life at home and with their friends, at work, and in the public sphere. We could call these different aspects of social freedom *personal* freedom, *productive* freedom, and *political* freedom. When functioning properly (that is, in accordance with its proper, legitimating function), the university supports the development of the capacity for *all three* of these freedoms in its students, in an integrated way throughout the educational process of the university. In the course of their university studies, students thus generally learn with this threefold aim in view: to be autonomous (and thus creative and responsible) in their personal relationships (personal freedom), in their places of work (productive freedom), and as critically engaged citizens (political freedom). How is this achieved?

In the case of personal freedom, it is achieved above all by the provision of a supportive environment for personal growth and development. This has at least as much to do with what goes on outside of the classroom, library, or laboratory as what goes on within formal learning spaces, but the academic and extra-curricular should be mutually reinforcing of one another in this regard. This includes the need to prioritise mental health and student well-being, matters of growing concern across university campuses. It means that universities have a responsibility to try to ensure that their students experience sexual freedom in ways that are respectful of others, by adopting a zero-tolerance attitude towards all forms of sexual violence (as supported by "Never Stand By" campaigns). It also means that universities have a responsibility to develop inclusive institutional norms and cultures. University cultures that deviate from this norm of inclusion and equality – as of course many did in the past (and unfortunately not only the past) around gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, abilities, and class – fail to embody the kind of ethos required for personal freedom in a democracy. In moving from a culture with built-in prejudices, say, against women, LGBT+ people and people of colour, to one in which equality is normalized and identity differences positively affirmed, a university becomes more hospitable to personal freedom (in the sense we are giving it here: social freedom in personal relationships) and can help prepare the student for personal freedom beyond the university. Cultural transitions of this sort can be said to constitute progress in terms of social freedom and are an important part of the justification universities can give of their claim to be effective in their promotion of social freedom. Universities can play (and in many cases arguably have played) a leading role in confronting those prejudices that are rooted in hierarchies that are structured by differences in social class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual identity and abilities. In doing so, they can also have a broader progressive impact on society, helping to create the cultural conditions for personal autonomy and thereby strengthening the fabric of democratic life.

In regard to productive freedom, the university makes a course of study available to the student that prepares the student for the world of work *insofar as work provides a locus of social freedom*. The latter clause is important. There are many respects in which the capitalist labour market and the work organizations that make it up are hostile to social freedom. For example, a work organization might produce commodities or services that are harmful to other human beings or destructive of the natural environment; it might produce things in a way that is exploitative of the workers; it might impose conditions of work that give workers very little autonomy, very little say in what they do or how they do it, and so on. It is not the purpose of the university

to prepare its students for *that* kind of work, even if the work is well paid and perhaps even carries some prestige. For such work does not involve what we are calling productive freedom, and we are saying that a key purpose of the modern university is to develop the capacity for productive freedom in its students, not just to enable them to find work or to enter the labour market where they choose. Work that does provide opportunities for the expression of productive freedom has characteristics of the following sort: it is aimed at the production of something useful (as distinct from harmful or pointless); its performance requires the exercise of some useful and socially recognized skill; it involves cooperation and joint decision-making with fellow workers; and it generally allows workers a collective say in how the work is done and what it is done for. It is only insofar as work allows for autonomous action in concert with others that it can serve as an expression of productive freedom, in the sense in which we are using that term. So, in developing their capacity for productive freedom in their university studies, students are preparing themselves for that kind of work.

Universities can help them to develop this capacity in several ways. Obviously, they can provide courses of study that equip students with useful (in the broad sense of serving some good) and socially recognizable skills. They can structure the learning experience so that in acquiring these skills the views and needs of others are taken into account. They can put in place cooperative learning practices and can make dialogue (as distinct from instruction) more central to the learning process.[19] In addition, universities can encourage awareness amongst their students of the variety of forms of socially valuable contribution, and thus of the variety of forms of productive freedom (including caring for others – especially the young and the old – volunteering, and engaging in various associations outside of paid work). This can be done by integrating participation in such forms into the university curriculum itself. Generally speaking, universities have a social responsibility to ensure that regardless of the profession their students enter and work in as graduates, they will act in socially responsible ways, achieving self-esteem through a recognition of their distinctive contribution to society, making the most of their talents and being rewarded fairly for their work. If students are encouraged to understand their own area of expertise in the context of the broader needs of society, they will be better equipped to express their capacity for social freedom in its productive aspect, and thereby again contribute to the strengthening and reproduction of their democratic form of life.

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[19] Jürgen Habermas, "The Idea of the University: Learning Processes," *New German Critique* 41 (1987): 3–22.

These are also the ways in which a university education at its best develops the student's capacity for political freedom. In this respect the purpose of universities most closely resembles that of public schools in the Durkheim-Dewey-Honneth conception mentioned above. If, at school, students are initiated into practices of mutually respectful inquiry and cooperative problem-solving, at university they become reflective about such practices and come to see their broader political significance and pre-conditions. This is one reason why freedom of expression is a crucial aspect of university life: it prepares the student for participation in (and renewal of) the democratic public sphere, and thereby the exercise of their capacity for political (as distinct from personal and productive) freedom. But freedom of expression in the university is important for social freedom not just from the point of view of the student: it also important for the broader community, as we will note again below.

We have just sketched three ways in which the university serves as to promote social freedom from the perspective of the student. By undergoing a university education, students can expect to develop capacities that will enable them to contribute positively and autonomously to their shared democratic way of life: capacities for social freedom in its personal, productive and political aspects. As an institution of higher education, the university should enhance at an advanced level the freedom of its students so that they can fulfil their potential to make distinctive, significant and positive contributions to all of the communities (families, workplaces, civil associations, nations, global society and so on) of which they will be members. But at this point of course we need to bear in mind that there will be many members of those communities who have not had and will never have a university education. If the university is to promote social freedom effectively, it cannot deliver freedoms to some members of the community while excluding or ignoring the freedoms of others. The university should be able to enhance the effective social freedom of every member of the community, not only those who benefit directly from the education opportunities it offers.

This is where the research-oriented and external engagement activities of the university come in. If, as we are proposing, the ultimate purpose of the modern university is to promote social freedom, it must serve this purpose not only in its teaching, where the social freedom of individual students is at stake, but also in its scholarship and research, where its reach and impact is wider. Clearly, there are various ways in which a university can, by way of its research activities, advance social freedom in broader communities. It can do it, most directly, by contributing to the communities of inquirers that make up the different disciplines. These communities can be local, national,

or global. As *democratic* communities, however, they are all guided by a spirit of open enquiry, mutual respect, commonly recognized and cooperatively pursued standards of excellence, and so on. Such communities are of course not fixed: new ones emerge as disciplines merge and mutate; others can disappear. The point is that, in the modern world, such communities depend in large part on the scholarly and research activities of universities. Then there is a broader community of scholars and scientific researchers who share a democratic ethos of enquiry whatever their discipline. Clearly, much university research aims at contributing to that community.

Beyond this, there is the impact university research has on communities whose members are not themselves participating in such research. If a university is to function well in its research activity, then this impact should also be one of increased social freedom. This might be easier to gauge at the local level, where much of the "community engagement" activities of universities is focused in practice. But in principle the responsibility of universities to do research that promotes social freedom extends beyond the local to the regional, national, and global community. University research plays a crucial role in informing policy and practice related to the greatest challenges facing humanity, including pandemics like Covid-19, climate change, migration crises, structural global inequalities, and many others.

In the global context, universities can also serve to promote social freedom by helping to ensure that ongoing processes of globalisation are driven not exclusively by the imperatives of a global capitalist order but more positively (in terms of social freedom) by the development of difference-sensitive, shared understandings across cultures. We are living in a partly decolonised world, one in which many of the peoples of the world continue to struggle for meaningful independence, for a voice that will be respected on the international stage and for equal standing in the global order. Universities have, through partnerships and collaborations as well as the educational opportunities offered to international students, a key role to play in this process which can enhance social freedom among a global society of peoples. Of course, universities face deep challenges and dilemmas in this domain, and indeed in their other spheres of impact, owing to their actual immersion in the global capitalist order and their subjection to the imperatives that drive it. This tension between norm (promotion of social freedom) and reality (subjection to the imperatives of global capitalism) brings us back to the questions of justification and critique that opened our discussion.

5. Freedom, Justification, and Critique

We noted in our opening remarks that provision of "value for money" is an inadequate answer to the question of justification that faces the modern university, even though that is the answer most of the people who pose the question in public debates about universities want and expect to hear. Of course, it is perfectly appropriate to demand of a university that it is financially well-managed, prudent in its expenditure, able to cover its costs, and so on. But satisfaction of such demands does not suffice as a justification. We suggested that justifications that take that form, that justify universities exclusively by reference to the value for money they represent, are ultimately question-begging. The reason *why* cost-effectiveness or addition of economic value satisfies the demand for justification remains unsaid. We also suggested that in the value-horizon of modernity, freedom is the chief justifying value, the value by reference to which the characteristic institutions of modernity are justified, if often only implicitly. We now want to suggest that a limited and inadequate understanding of freedom provides the unspoken justifying value implicit in much hostile criticism of the university, *as well as* in much edificatory defence of the university in its traditional form. We need the theory of social freedom and its application to the modern university outlined above to see why this is so.

When critics hostile to universities demand of them that they justify themselves in terms of value for money or contribution to the contemporary economic order, they are effectively saying that universities are ultimately answerable to the choices of the individual consumer. How, after all, is economic value determined and how is it manifest? In the acts of buying and selling that make up the relevant markets. The economic value of an institution and the goods and services it provides just is the price it is able to uphold in an open market, which is to say (according to those with this outlook) in the course of voluntary transactions between individuals unhindered by external impediments. "Why should the value of a university education be any different?" they will say. Its value is shown, on this view, in the purchasing choices of those in the market for education, in the price they are prepared to pay for getting something they want. It doesn't matter why the consumer would want it, but the rational consumer of education would want a return that gave them more effective choices or purchasing power in other markets, especially the labour market. In this way, the university is answerable to the negative freedom of those to whom it offers its services, and it promotes negative freedom by expanding the purchasing choices of those who buy its services

(that's the deal). If the university needs propping up by the state, it must be failing in this purpose. And the propping up itself, by drawing on tax-payers' money, adds the further injustice of depriving those tax-payers of freedoms they would have enjoyed without the tax-deductions. Far from being justified, state-funded universities are thus seen as part of the welfare state's apparatus of injustice, as an illegitimate restriction of the negative freedoms of its subjects.

We have already indicated why we take the negative conception of freedom to be a limited and inadequate one. But the point we are making now is that it is this conception that stands behind much hostile criticism of universities that issues demands for justification in exclusively economic terms. And because of this, that kind of criticism itself should be considered limited and inadequate. Negative freedom does not provide the standard we need to take the measure of universities or to see where the grounds for their justification properly lie.

Defenders of the publicly funded university should be wary, then, of responding in kind to the economically framed demand for justification issued by the hostile critics. While there may be pragmatic reasons for showing why universities really do provide value for money, and withstand demands for justification of this sort, they are not the salient justifying reasons. Even if it can be shown that, indirectly and in the long-run, universities are effective in promoting negative freedom, that still wouldn't provide the right kind of justification. Seeing this, some defenders of the university recoil from the neo-liberal framing of the debate around justification set by the hostile critics and fall back on a conception of the university justified in more traditional terms. This can be done in a number of ways, often drawing on the German (*Bildung*), British (liberal), American (pragmatist), or more contemporary traditions of inquiry into the idea of a university.[20] For many of those who seek to further these traditions by articulating an ideal by which universities might be judged, the notion that universities are justified in terms of the capacity they foster for individual autonomy figures prominently. In other words, such conceptions take the university to be justified by an ideal that is articulated in terms of reflective freedom. They oppose neo-liberal hostile criticism of universities grounded in a norm of negative freedom with a defence of the university grounded in a norm of reflective freedom.

The appeal to a norm of reflective freedom isn't always explicit, but it is often implicit in claims that the value of a university education from the

[20] Michael A. Peters and Ronald Barnett (eds.), *The Idea of the University: A Reader, Volume 1* (New York: Peter Lang, 2018).

point of view of the student lies primarily in its development of the student's capacity for *judgment*. This refinement of the capacity for judgment has for a long time been thought to be the prerogative of the traditional humanities, the teaching of which is itself widely regarded to be the prerogative of the university.[21] According to this line of thought, it is through university study, and through study of the humanities *par excellence*, that students learn how to think for themselves, to think critically and creatively, and thereby develop their capacity for reflective freedom. It may be the case that in becoming reflectively autonomous the student learns useful skills, transferrable skills that enable the student to find various kinds of employment, but on this view that is an added bonus. The main point of university education is cultivation. Alongside teaching oriented by that end, universities undertake scholarship and research. But while some of that research is of use to the outside world, what makes universities distinct in this respect (the production of research) is that they also do research for its own sake, that is, research performed by scholars in the course of exercising their own reflective freedom rather than meeting some externally imposed research agenda.

We do not dispute that reflective freedom is an important value which universities should seek to realize through their teaching. We also agree that reflective freedom provides an important principle for the conduct of scholarship and research. The problem is that, like negative freedom (though for different reasons), reflective freedom is a limited and inadequate conception of freedom. As previously remarked, the main weakness with reflective freedom is that it fails to capture the lived reality of freedom and its embeddedness in social relationships and institutions. As a justifying value for the university, it is too focused on the individual, on the development of the individual's capacities for judgement, without taking sufficiently into account the contribution to the wider society that is expected through the exercise of those capacities. Taking universities to be justified in terms of the social freedom they promote does take that into account. Universities that serve that purpose do not educate with a view to developing the student's capacity for autonomy merely in the abstract and so independently of the concrete ways in which that capacity is expressed in real life. They do it to enable students to *contribute to society* in a reflectively autonomous way (and not, we should emphasise, merely by exercising negative freedoms, by doing and pursuing whatever they wish, as they might do in contributing to the "economy" as consumers). Furthermore, the idea of reflective freedom makes it appear as if freedom can be achieved on one's own. But students prepared for social freedom realize that

[21] Collini, *What Are Universities For?*; Nussbaum, *Not for Profit*.

freedom in its full sense is a collective achievement, requiring relationships of mutual recognition and a shared ethos of cooperation between equals in the various spheres of action. They see it as their responsibility to sustain and renew the social fabric of democratic life, and not just to be self-legislating or authentic individuals.

If the problem with taking university education to be justified through its promotion of reflective freedom is that it ignores the contribution that education should make to the fabric of democratic life, something similar can be said of university research. It is one thing to say (as we think it should be said) that research should not be driven exclusively by agendas imposed from the outside; it is another to say that it should not make a positive contribution to the broader life of a democracy, construed as it is by the theory of social freedom. To suppose that the scholars of a university are somehow buffered from the demands of democratic life, as in the past (and not just in the past) some have presumed themselves to be, is to assume that they enjoy some privileged status, that they are a special class of citizens to whom the normal rules don't apply. But in a democracy, there are no such privileges and no such classes. The university as an institution in the service of an elite is unjustifiable in a democracy, and those who view it as a promoter of social freedom see no merit in nostalgic visions of the university that have that elitist character. Edificatory defences of the university too often overlook the anti-democratic thrust of the traditional university and its role in reproducing hierarchy, privilege and inequality. And those who defend the university that way have sometimes urged resistance not only to the neo-liberal transformation of the university (as they should), but also (as they shouldn't) to its modernization in terms of greater accountability to democratic norms.

6. Conclusion

It is important to the view we have been presenting that social freedom is not just a utopian ideal. We are not saying that in a perfect world the university would promote social freedom, whatever purposes it currently serves or has served in the past. Nor have we been describing an "Idea" of the university that can serve as an ideal against which to measure actual universities. There are various reasons why we don't want to say those things, but the main one is that it makes criticism of actual universities look arbitrary. It makes it easy to shrug off criticism of practices that diminish social freedom as idealistic and other-worldly, or perhaps as the self-serving opinion of an elite.

But in the view we have been presenting, such criticism draws on norms that are already implicit in, or internal to, the accepted social understanding of

the university. It is "internal" rather than "external" criticism because it does not appeal to anything that goes beyond what is already generally accepted as a legitimating norm of the university, a norm that has helped shape the university into the kind of institution that it is. We are assuming, then, that in the course of its history (at least in recent times) the university has actually functioned in the service of social freedom, more or less adequately, and that its history can plausibly be told as one of gains and losses in social freedom. While we cannot hope to back up that assumption here, we can at least gesture at developments that are indicative of gains, such as widened access to universities, greater inclusiveness, increased sensitivity to cultural differences, and so on. This is certainly not to say or imply that the history of the modern university is one of steady progress. Rather, it is to draw attention to the history-shaping role of the norm we are invoking, social freedom, its "immanence" so to speak in that history, and therefore its connection to reality. Criticism of the university in terms of its success or failure in realizing social freedom is anchored in a norm that is constitutive for that institution, not an other-worldly norm or one that is arbitrarily imposed from the outside. Such "internal" or "immanent" criticism thus has a more compelling rational basis and is harder to ignore.

In particular, it has a stronger basis than criticism that takes the university to be justified in terms of the negative or reflective freedom it promotes. But negative and reflective freedom are also norms the pursuit of which has shaped the history of the university. If the self-understanding of the university as a transmitter of reflective freedom (for the few) has given way, under the pressure of democratization, to one in which it serves the social freedom (of all), then under the pressure of globalization it has also ceded ground to a neo-liberal self-understanding of the university as a realiser of negative freedom. We are in the midst of a historical argument between these three conceptions of the purpose of the university. It is in this context that the case for universities as realisers and promoters of social freedom, such as the one we have presented here, needs to be made.

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