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Which freedom to defend? Freedom of research between elitism and participation

Today we witness a variety of attacks on the different forms of research. Opposing these attacks against scientists, journalists and artists, the demand for a freedom of research is an important common ground for organizing solidarity and publicly denouncing repression, intimidation and manipulation. However, the notion of freedom of research is a complex one and it is worthwhile to pause for a short moment, in order to reflect on its possible implications and limitations and to ask: which freedom to defend?

Nobody would probably explicitly support the idea that freedom of research means the absence of *any* constraint. Such a notion of the freedom of research would be meaningless. Instead, usually relevant constraints are picked, it seems, according to “moral” or “political” intuition. This intuition may differ significantly between persons and contexts and may more often than not even be contradictory. However, in the negative and ad hoc usage, which marks the notion of freedom of research, such implicit conflicts stay largely invisible. Due to this, almost anyone can agree to the abstract demand of a freedom of research today. But, in this situation “freedom of research” can all too easily become an empty rally cry.

For this paper I try to advance the development of a more meaningful notion of the freedom of research in two ways. First, I want to present an association, which, in the context of German academia, is linked with the “freedom of science” like no other: The “league freedom of science” (Bund Freiheit der Wissenschaft¹). The case of the BFW is relevant

¹ In the following I will mainly refer to it as BFW.

even for a more general discussion, because it creates a friction surface for the contemporary debate, as it was distinctively conservative in large parts and as its demand for “freedom” is at odds with more progressive interpretations of the freedom of research that, for instance, I would intuitively lean towards. The BFW is kind of a kaleidoscope, which can help us discern the different facets of the notion at hand. In order to clarify this question of how freedom of research can be (and, in fact, is) justified, I will draw on the work of the philosopher Torsten Wilholt, who distinguishes three principal justifications for the freedom of research. On this basis I will argue for a *political understanding* of the freedom of research, which allows to make a strong statement for independent research based on the publicity of knowledge while, at the same time, fostering democratic participation in science.

I. Which freedom of research? – The “Bund Freiheit der Wissenschaft”²

Looking back to the discussion of the freedom of research in Germany, probably the most obvious institution that comes into mind is the “Bund Freiheit der Wissenschaft” – a group mainly formed by professors who basically opposed the student’s movement of the 1960s and the attempted democratic reforms in German universities of that time. How is it that the notion of “freedom of science” became so important for liberal and neo-conservative professors after 1968?

The “league” was founded 1970 in Bonn and dissolved 2015, having already lost most of its influence in the late 1970s. The protagonists of the BFW came together from different local associations, groups, and loose networks of professors, which were united in their opposition to the student’s movement, to the presence of socialist groups within the university and to efforts to democratize the university by implicating different status groups equally into university committees.³

Even though most of the positions and demands predated the “league” and were tied to more or less local topics, the *political strategy* of the “protest of the professors” (Wehrs) changed markedly when it was institutionally established under the umbrella of the BFW.

2 My description of the BFW is mainly taken from two recent historiographic studies by Nikolai Wehrs and Svea Koischwitz. I thus do not present own historical research, rather I am looking for some more general implications of their findings (cf. Nikolai Wehrs, *Protest der Professoren. Der « Bund Freiheit der Wissenschaft » in den 1970er Jahren*, Göttingen, Wallstein, 2014 ; Svea Koischwitz, *Der Bund Freiheit der Wissenschaft in den Jahren 1970–1976. Ein Interessenverband zwischen Studentenbewegung und Hochschulreform*, Köln/Weimar/Wien, Böhlau, 2017).

3 In a Humboldtian tradition German academia is largely self-administered. However solely full professors (*Ordinarien*) were traditionally considered to be qualified to take decisions. In the late 1960s voices became louder, which demanded the equal representation and co-determination of professors, *Assistenten* (permanent postdoc researchers) and students. These demands were heavily contested especially when it came to appointment committees (cf. Olaf Bartz, *Expansion und Umbau. Hochschulreformen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland zwischen 1964 und 1977, die hochschule*, n° 2, 2007, p. 154–170, here 164 f.)

While former initiatives had mainly tried to win informal influence over politicians and publicists, the BFW addressed the general public, with an aggressive PR strategy, seeking to turn into scandal the state of things in the contemporary university, which they described as the “weakest institution of this society”⁴, especially susceptible to radical subversion. In fact, a large part of the BFW’s work consisted of publicizing infractions against professors and the disruption of seminars or lectures by students, and turn them into scandals.

One iconic example for this strategy of public scandal-creation is Folkmar Koenigs, a law professor at the Technische Universität Berlin, who had been doused with yellow paint by a communist group after trying to remove a notice by students, denouncing members of a predecessor organisation of the BFW as shamous (see figure 1).⁵

Figure 1: Folkmar Koenigs, turning student’s attacks into a publicity event. His poster reads: “TU professor, disfavoured by the communists” (picture alliance / Konrad Giehr). (For figure 1 see: https://tagesspiegel.de/images/koenigs_prof/10082242/3)

Such attacks were described by the “league” as “defamation, terror, acts of violence and infractions against the law”⁶ and were certainly infractions against the freedom of research. At the same time the BFW members did for their part not hesitate to publicly denounce colleagues, whom they reckoned to be not sufficiently anti-communist and even to create and publish lists of suspicious colleagues, who should be isolated and banned from posts.⁷ In the discourse of the time, the BFW was predominantly seen as a conservative and elitist association of full professors (*Ordinarien*), who wanted to defend their inherited privileges. Nikolai Wehrs and Svea Koischwitz show, however, that this explanation is too simple. They argue that the BFW was strongly supported by a younger generation of professors, who themselves were critical of the “traditional” university. Actually, many of the BFW’s members were considered to be “reformers” in the early 1960s. The reforms back then were driven by other motives than the “democratization” sought in the 1970s, though. By the end of the 1950s, policy makers increasingly feared that the traditional elitist German education system could not produce a sufficient number of qualified employees, officials and researchers, assuring the nation’s political and economic importance in the world. The term of a “catastrophe of education” (*Bildungskatastrophe*), coined by Georg Picht in the mid -

4 See the founding proclamation of the BFW: Bund Freiheit der Wissenschaft, « Gründungsaufwurf », *Darmstädter Studentenzeitung*, vol. 18, n° 116, 1970, p. 25.

5 Cf. Wehrs, *op. cit.*, p. 327–329.

6 Bund Freiheit der Wissenschaft, *op. cit.*

7 Cf. Koischwitz, *op. cit.*, p. 395–409 ; Wehrs, *op. cit.*, p. 269–276.

1960s,⁸ envisioned the dystopia of a collapsing education system, dropping behind the two superpowers of the time.⁹ In this context a “technocratic” discourse on reforms of the education system gained momentum. It aimed at facilitating access to higher education, extending and de-hierarchizing the staff, and modernizing the organization of science and education.

By the end of the 1960s the denotation of “reforms” had however markedly changed. Against the background of the student’s movement the political dimension of the university as a societal institution became more and more relevant. While the technocratic discourse aimed at efficiently and functionally steering mass education, the administration of the university now was subjected to demands to enable an equal participation of different status groups. A “democratization” of procedures was called for.

This was exactly the line of rupture for the members of the BFW, as can easily be read from their founding document from 1970:

“Where ideologies prevail which deem the destruction of the given a precondition for the realization of utopian goals, the cry for reforms does no longer serve a modernization and increased efficiency of the institution, but aims at its paralysis and destruction.”¹⁰

While in democratic terms, a broad participation of the persons concerned seems a value in itself, for the BDW the institution’s “efficiency”¹¹ is the final argument. Reforms are to technically improve the institutions procedures. But democratizing reforms were not only rejected in the light of technocratic arguments. One of the underlying motives was the more general rejection of external influences on research and education:

“The fundament of the freedom of science is, however, that only scientists decide who is accepted as a scientist.”¹²

8 See Georg Picht, *Die deutsche Bildungskatastrophe. Analyse und Dokumentation*, 2. ed., München, dtv, 1965.

9 Cf. Wehrs, *op. cit.*, p. 40–51.

10 Bund Freiheit der Wissenschaft, *op. cit.*, own translation.

11 This efficiency cannot, however, solely be reduced to an economic concept. It is deeply rooted in a technocratic attitude, which is closely linked with a functionalist and modernist worldview, cf. David Gartman, « Why Modern Architecture Emerged in Europe, not America: The New Class and the Aesthetics of Technocracy », *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 17, n° 5, 2000, p. 75–96.

12 Bund Freiheit der Wissenschaft, *op. cit.*, own translation.

At the same time, and probably even more importantly, participation of students in the academic administration was rejected, because it appeared to be a means of takeover by dogmatic Marxists, and thus a first step towards overthrowing the state.

“The unlimited participation of students is the crowbar by which the German university as the weakest institution of society can be unhinged.”¹³

The BFW fought relentless fights against Marxist colleagues. In their perspective, this was seen as the protection of freedom and plurality of research against a dogmatist-Marxist dictatorship. From the perspective of the student organizations, the league was, however, suppressing free research by discriminating minority Marxist positions.¹⁴ For the BFW, the academic conflicts were first and foremost seen as elements in a global communist threat. They perceived themselves as defenders of the state (and thus of democracy). From their technocratic perspective, the stability of the state depended on the “functional construction of its institutions”.¹⁵ The university is supposed to be managed based on “factual authority”. In a paradoxical chain of argumentation, “democratized” and thus “politicized” committees do subvert its efficiency and, thus, “democracy”.¹⁶

The BDW did not explicitly define its understanding of “freedom” or even of “research” or “science”. What conception did then guide its activities? The kind of freedom its members were interested in is implicitly deducible from the conflicts they chose.

There are two different and sometimes contradicting motives behind the BFWs defence of the “freedom of research”. The BFW strongly argues in its favour when it comes to the supposed predominance of dogmatic Marxism and attacks on its members. Its positioning, however, becomes highly ambivalent if one considers its own activities. Its members were not shying away from intimidating other academics and researchers. The overall rejection of external influences seems to point to an individual freedom, which is sought to be maintained as a personal privilege, guaranteeing freedom from a political questioning of research goals, motivations etc. This points to the persistence of an *aristocratic* attitude which has strongly shaped German academia and whose remnants can be traced until today.¹⁷ At the

13 *Id.*, own translation.

14 Cf. Koischwitz, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 299, own translation.

16 Cf. *id.* Of course, the meaning of “democracy” was itself at play in the disputes of the time. A more encompassing discussion of this broader conflict would, however, exceed the scope of this article.

17 To name but one influential figure: Max Weber insisted in his lecture “Science as a Vocation” from 1917 that science is a matter of intellectual aristocracy rather than democracy (Max Weber, *Wissenschaft als Beruf*, Stuttgart, Reclam, 1995, p. 10; cf. also Fritz K. Ringer, *The decline of the German mandarins. The German academic community 1890–1933*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press,

same time the BFWs members can be distinguished by a *technocratic* attitude, which does not promote “freedom of research” as a goal in itself, but rather as a means for enhancing the system’s performance. One of the BFW’s proponents, Wilhelm Hennis, insisted:

„Today, the freedom of science is hardly justified metaphysically anymore, but usually exclusively under the aspect of its utility, according to which only a free science is a progressing science, capable of development.”¹⁸

Against this double and ambivalent background, the BFW was able to ward off any external “democratic” or “political” influence both in the name of the established order and due to individual entitlement.¹⁹

II. Three arguments for a freedom of research

I now want to link the descriptions of the BFW with a more general discussion of the freedom of research. Torsten Wilholt²⁰ distinguishes three major arguments for its justification. His work can help us to better understand if, and to what extent, the freedom of research is opposed to a political and participatory conception of research and its organizations. The BFW explicitly argued against democracy and politics *in* science (in order to maintain democratic state institutions). How is such an opposition of a free research and politics justified? And are there alternative ways of stressing the importance of a free research, which do not preclude democratic procedures and political positionings?

The three principle types of arguments in favour of the freedom of research according to Wilholt are:

- 1) The justification of a freedom of research based on reasons of autonomy.
- 2) Freedom of research based on epistemological justifications.
- 3) A political justification of the freedom of research.

1) The *justification by autonomy* is based on enlightenment subject philosophies. Especially Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814) considers the “Denkfreiheit”, the freedom of thought, to be an inalienable human right and therefore as something which marks the subject as a human being. Taken up by Wilhelm von Humboldt, this argument had great influence on

1969). For the persistence of “feudal” structures in academia see Tilman Reitz, « Academic hierarchies in neo-feudal capitalism: how status competition processes trust and facilitates the appropriation of knowledge », *Higher Education*, vol. 73, n° 6, 2017, p. 871–886.

18 As cited in Koischwitz, *op. cit.*, p. 296, own translation.

19 Cf. Wehrs, *op. cit.*, p. 357 f. ; Koischwitz, *op. cit.*, p. 295–297.

20 T. WILHOLT, *Die Freiheit der Forschung. Begründungen und Begrenzungen*, Berlin, Suhrkamp, 2012.

the development especially of German academia.²¹ However, it has clear limitations. Most importantly, it only provides a justification for the freedom of the individual researcher. It grants her the right to choose a subject of inquiry according to her own preferences. However, it falls short of serving as an adequate justification for research as a *collective* practice. No necessity to provide the practical means which are indispensable for individually pursuing a specific question arises from this argument, nor does it call for an obligation to systematically foster the freedom of research on a disciplinary or collective level.²²

2) For the *epistemological argument*, freedom of research is necessary, because it is a way of increasing knowledge. The free pursuit of one's own interests and own ideas yields the common good of truth, just as the invisible hand of the market transforms individual interests into a common wealth according to economic liberalism.²³ The fundamental assumption is (1) that freedom of research produces a diversity of positions and (2) that this diversity is a precondition for the progression of knowledge.²⁴ Such a perspective, however, largely frames science as a neutral institution. Oftentimes, a natural asymmetry between truth and falseness is presumed: false statements can be accepted within the plurality of positions, because truth is procedurally guaranteed; it will prevail 'in the long run'.²⁵ However, if one considers the social and political dimensions which unavoidably surround and permeate scientific disputes²⁶, such an automatic tendency towards the truth becomes less evident.

Within the epistemological argument, there are two typical reasons for accepting the aim of advancing knowledge: an intrinsic one, arguing that knowledge is an aim in itself, vs. an instrumentalist one, arguing that knowledge is important for external reasons such as economic competitiveness.²⁷

3) While the first two arguments are still highly popular in current debates and will probably have a familiar ring to them, Torsten Wilholt proposes a third argument for the freedom of research – the *political justification*. Here, the value of the freedom of research is drawn from its contribution to a democratic society. This contribution can be found on two levels. On the one hand, open democratic processes of decision making are in need of commonly available knowledge – rather than just instrumental or secretive knowledge, available only

21 *Ibid.*, p. 47-49

22 *Ibid.*, p. 56-62

23 Interestingly Adam Smith introduces the famous concept of the "invisible hand" not in his economic writings, but in his moral philosophy. Cf. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, K. Haakonssen (éd.), Cambridge et al., Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 215 ; see also Wilholt, *op. cit.*, p. 100-110.

24 Wilholt, *op. cit.*, p. 110-116.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 87-88.

26 As has been pointed out by classical studies in the sociology of science, cf. Robert K. Merton, « Science and the Social Order », *Philosophy of Science*, vol. 5, n° 3, 1938, p. 321-337.

27 Wilholt, *op. cit.*, p. 117-158.

to political elites.²⁸ However, while this is a valid point, the freedom of research is not only relevant as a provider of seemingly “neutral” facts for the political discussion. What is more, freedom of research is relevant for the *emergence of political subjects*. Torsten Wilholt advances this argument drawing on Jürgen Habermas’ deliberative understanding of democracy as a communicative discourse.²⁹ Such a discourse cannot be reduced to the conflict and aggregation of pre-established interests and meanings, as classical liberal and pluralist political theories propose.³⁰ One does, however, not have to adhere to the Habermasian ideal of a non-hierarchical discourse in order to support such a conception of the becoming of the democratic subject. Agonistic and radical concepts of democracy, which have been very influential in recent years, should have few problems to support this non-individualistic perspective on the political subject.³¹ The important point is: Science is engaged in social practices, which do not presuppose a fixed political subject with definitely shaped interests, attitudes and opinions. Instead, political subjects are shaped and reshaped *within* the political process. In this line of argumentation science becomes democratically relevant by involving the political public in science’s procedures. This active participation in research practices transforms the political subject. The independence of research is democratically justified, because of its contribution to the political ‘subjectivation’ *and* ‘objectivation’, the co-emergence of relevant knowledge and “persons concerned”, not for being a ‘de-politicized’ sphere. This implies that freedom of research is not only a freedom of the hermit, the self-sufficient thinker.³² Thus, for the political justification academic freedom becomes the more pressing, the stronger science openly engages with the public debate, without falling back on the authoritative gesture of preaching an irrevocable truth. In short, this perspective allows to avoid the false opposition of science as either a pure and detached enterprise or as the rational means – a mere instrument – for politics. Science as an *independent voice* gains relevance, where it *involves* the members of the public in its practices.

III. Conclusion

The case of the “Bund Freiheit der Wissenschaft” points to the fact that the demand for “freedom of research” can promote very different and in part contradictory positions. This

28 *Ibid.*, p. 224–225.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 234–236.

30 Cf. Isaac D. Balbus, « The Concept of Interest in Pluralist and Marxian Analysis », *Politics & Society*, vol. 1, n° 2, 1971, p. 154–166.

31 Cf. Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, London/New York, Verso, 2000, p. 98–105 ; Jacques Rancière, *La Mésentente. Politique et philosophie*, Paris, Galilée, 1995.

32 This is especially important, because individual conceptions of research and authorship are increasingly complemented or even replaced by large scale projects and experimental settings, which undermine individualistic conceptions of science (cf. Karin Knorr Cetina, *Epistemic Cultures: How the Sciences Make Knowledge*, Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 166–171).

makes us aware of the implicit assumptions which are at stake today when freedom of research is evoked for both defending academics against state repression and, for instance, rejecting limitations imposed on research in genetic engineering.

Using the typology by Wilholt, we can see that the BFW's argumentation mainly drew on justifications by autonomy and on epistemological justifications. Warding off "political" influences on research, the BFW's members insisted on a very specific autonomy of academia: On the one hand, they took up an aristocratic understanding of science, which is prominent in the German intellectual field. On the other hand, the technocratic inclination of the BFW's members advanced a very different rationale. Here, freedom of research was not a personal entitlement, granted to the elitist intellectual class of the "German Mandarines"³³. Rather, the freedom of research was justified by its alleged contribution to the smooth running of the state machine. This perspective can be understood as a specific form of the epistemological argument: namely, an instrumentalist one. Academic freedom, here, is thought to be beneficial for the advancement of knowledge. This knowledge, however, is not an aim in itself but it is expected to advance political and economic planning.³⁴ Such justifications based on individual autonomy and epistemological advantages can, as the case of the BFW shows, support a conservative position in the academic field, integrating 'aristocratic' and 'technocratic' worldviews.

Today, such technocratic aspirations, aiming at an economic rationalization and increased efficiency will likely not cater to a euphemism of state planning, but they can foster efforts to remould the university according to a neoliberal governmentality.

To be clear, this article does not intend to reduce the complex notion of freedom of research to a politically convenient interpretation. It does not seek to exclude anybody from using the term, be it based on individualistic, liberal or democratic reasons. However, if we consider the differentiations mentioned above, we can avoid contradictions arising from inadvertent shifts between different justifications. Also, it can help to sensitize us for the possible implications of *specific* notions of freedom of research. If we want to defend the freedom of research without falling back on conservative and a(nti)-political concepts of research, the political justification of the freedom of research is of particular interest, opening up new venues of the debate. *This* freedom of research can criticize the subjection of research under economic criteria, without falling back on a state centred position. It can question the secretive research on military technology, without subjecting science to fancies of

33 Cf. Fritz K. Ringer, *The decline of the German mandarins. The German academic community 1890–1933*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1969

34 With this, the BFW's positions resonate well with the optimistic view of planning in the early 1970th, when, animated by cybernetic theory, even a general "government computer" seemed graspable. Cf. Dirk van Laak, « Planung, Planbarkeit und Planungseuphorie », *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte*, 2010, http://docupedia.de/zg/van_laak_planung_v1_de_2010 (11.1.2019).

“public opinion”.³⁵ It can, finally, help us to oppose manifest and latent manipulations of research aims and processes while inviting a public participation in research and fostering the engagement of science in public debates.

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35 This is particularly relevant concerning the contemporary attacks on gender studies. The vilification of gender studies in the name of the common sense of the “people”, claimed by right-wing populist and religious groups, is increasingly complimented by state repression, as the recent case of Hungary sadly shows, where the right-wing populist government of Victor Orbán has shut down gender studies departments. Cf. Lesley Wilson, « State control over academic freedom in Hungary threatens all universities », *The Guardian*, 6. septembre 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2018/sep/06/state-control-over-academic-freedom-in-hungary-threatens-all-universities> (15.1.2019).

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