

## **The (Bad) Example of the University**

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### **Abstract**

The moment bullying becomes a topic of academic discourse the question should also be asked whether the university is the right place for discussing this particular topic. What is in fact the possible relation the academy can have towards this theme?

It seems fairly easy to note that the academy can become, just like any regular space where people are gathered in groups, a place that hosts bullying. But whereas this form of bullying could be seen as external, as a side-effect, to the university; the university is, however, also an institution that creates bullying due to its internal aspects of being an institution. In my paper I will try to enter a bit more into this second form of bullying at the university.

This second form of bullying can take up several different characteristics. A first form can be on a personal level; the university is in fact a place where only certain people have power and can handle this power in a 'bad' or 'selfish' way. Even though this form of bullying is not without importance my main focus will lay on another form of 'internal bullying', a form of bullying that I call 'structural bullying'. In fact, can the clashes between the different sciences not be seen as interwoven with attitudes and actions that can easily be called 'bullying'? In trying to demonstrate this fact, I will start by confronting this claim from a historical point of view after which I will confront myself with the current situation at our universities.

**Key Words:** You can add up to 10 key words. The first key word start with an uppercase letter, the rest will be in lower case, unless they are proper names. Use a comma to separate terms and a period after the last one.

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“Why do you notice the splinter in your brother's eye, but do not perceive the wooden beam in your own?” *Luke 6:41*

Looking at the etymology of the word ‘bully’ one is immediately confronted with the truth of what bullying is. ‘Bully’ derives from the Dutch word ‘boel’ or ‘boele’ and meant lover or brother. The word, however, took not even a full century to take on a rather negative meaning. Soon it became to mean (respectively) ‘protector of prostitutes’ or ‘harasser of the weak’, the lover took advantage of what should have been the loved one and the brother mistreated the ‘younger’ ones. So even though the word used to have a positive meaning, it soon turned into something very negative. Somebody who was supposed to protect, an (older) brother or a lover, turned into somebody who took advantage of his or her position.

So bullying as taking advantage of one’s position, as abuse of one’s power. If this is a basic aspect of bullying, or at least part of it, then I think that having a look at the university as an institution could prove to be useful, and maybe, in a certain sense, even ‘healing’.

In what follows, I will however not talk about the university as a public space where bullying can take place. I don’t want to focus on student behavior. What I do propose is to investigate if, and in what way, the university is built, constructed, in a way which allows it to be an institute that has the peril of bullying in its proper DNA; that is, a structural pre-imposition of institutional ‘openness’ towards bullying. I will first consider some historical aspects after which I will turn to the current situation in our contemporary university institution.

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### 1. Starting Rather Badly

It would probably not be particularly wrong to say that the university institution wasn't born under a good constellation when one confronts it with the theme of bullying. Looking at the beginning of the university as an institution, that is the mediaeval institution, we can see from the start that some sort of bullying was present, and this from its very own *formation*. Contrary to our contemporary universities, where we can find more than a dozen of diverse faculties, departments and schools, the mediaeval university consisted of a maximum of four faculties: the faculties of theology, medicine, law and the faculty of philosophy. Not all university institutions however possessed all four of these faculties. But what was common knowledge was that only three of these four faculties were to be considered as 'higher' or as 'superior'. One and only one faculty was considered as 'lower' or 'inferior': the faculty of philosophy (the faculty of the arts or the Humanities, as one could say today).

In order to be able to understand this somewhat strange division we should, however, start by considering this fact in its context. First of all, the faculty of philosophy was largely considered as a 'preparatory' faculty. In fact, the faculty of philosophy was called the *Ancilla Theologiae* – that is the handmaiden of theology.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the students entering this faculty were the youngest ones and this can only confirm the fact that the arts faculty was indeed preparatory, and obviously there is nothing wrong with preparatory faculties nor is there any reason to scream for a 'bullying-alarm'.

The problem however is that even in this context some other aspects do form a serious problematic that can be seen as a form of bullying. First of all, even though there existed universities who had just one faculty not a single medieval university consisted merely of a faculty of philosophy.<sup>2</sup> What is important to add here is that most students who started in the arts faculty never even entered one of the higher faculties. So the preparatory claim could be seen as not *that* consistent, and maybe there were other reasons for calling this faculty the

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‘lower’ one. In fact, secondly and more importantly, the fact that the students were the youngest ones did not imply that also the ‘professors’ – or at least that is how we would call them today – were younger than those of the other faculties. This was indeed not always the case. And exactly these ‘professors’ did not really appreciate the status given to their faculty. In fact, it did not take long before some of these ‘professors’ of the arts or philosophy faculty started to rebel against the lower status of their faculty and especially against the confinements that were imposed upon them. Exactly these confinements are the reason why I think one can speak of bullying even in the context of the mediaeval university. In Paris, for example, there were frequent controls by theologians on the teachings of the arts faculty. Furthermore, ‘professors’ of the arts were very often reminded of their task to be humble, a requirement that probably would have had better effects upon some theologians of that day. Because reminding the teachers of their required virtue of humility was in fact a good way to keep them from invading other domains.<sup>3</sup>

Like I said, some of these ‘professors’ didn’t easily accept the ‘preparatory’ status of their faculty nor the strict confinements imposed upon them. Siger from Brabant or Boethius from Dacia, just to name two can easily be pinpointed as part of the unhappy group (if one wants to interpret some of Thomas of Aquinas’s affirmations regarding the *preambula fidei*, it seems that even he, a teacher of theology, thought the restrictions on the philosophy faculty were too stringent<sup>4</sup>). Furthermore, the frequent controls upon the philosophers more than once resulted in trials and condemnns that went from prohibition of teaching to, in some rare cases, much worse punishments<sup>5</sup>.

However, without wanting to remain too constraint by history, this form of structural university bullying didn’t stop that quickly. Still Immanuel Kant (and that is almost 5 centuries later) talks about the diverse faculties in the universities in the same manner. The theology faculty is still seen as the most superior of the other two higher faculties and the faculty of

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philosophy is still considered as the lower one.<sup>6</sup> What is very interesting and significant in Kant's reasoning regarding this classification is that he tried to interpret it. In fact, from being simply the lower faculty, for Kant it came to be the lower faculty because it was utterly free. The lower faculty was considered the lower one because it was 'useless' in a positive way, that is without any utility to the state.<sup>7</sup>

Even though the university institution underwent some major changes during and after the Enlightenment, in a rather strange way this form of structural bullying remained present in the further development of the university up until our present day. The only thing that changed was the 'bullyer' and, as we shall see in what follows, exactly this new way of interpreting the 'lower' state of the arts or philosophy faculty as thought of by Kant was precisely what he needed and what would start haunting the humanities in our modern times.

## 2. The Two Cultures

Coming closer to our time, I think that probably most of us have read Sir Charles P. Snow's *Rede Lecture at Cambridge The Two Cultures*.<sup>8</sup> Basically, what Snow wanted to say comes down to the following two fundamental ideas: first; there is no communication between the scientific and the non-scientific culture, and secondly – a consideration which can without much doubt be classified as a 'bullish' remark – that this non-scientific culture lacked the rigor and the capacities to understand the industrial and scientific revolution. Snow calls these intellectuals of that non-scientific culture 'natural Luddites', in short: people who rebel against progress! In fact, this lack of the non-scientific culture was the gravest of all things for Snow as he thought that scientists were to save not just the day, but could actually change the world into a better place by helping the underprivileged.

Before entering into our comments on these claims of Snow, let us start, however, by accepting that the non-scientific

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culture of Snow can be considered as the Arts and Humanities. It also wouldn't be that wrong to translate Snow's concept of the scientific culture into the natural sciences (exact and applied). Maybe it would also not be that bad to re-allow the Arts and Humanities to have somewhat of a scientific nature.

What is first of all interesting is what Snow says both cultures think about each other and how this confirms their state of non-communication. Already Snow could state that most comments on behalf of natural scientists towards humanists and vice versa are based on commonplaces. Natural scientists are superficial and shallow optimists and humanists have despicable social attitudes.<sup>9</sup> But, even though Snow said that these were commonplaces, it doesn't hold him from adding that yes, natural scientists are optimists but not superficial ones. In fact, their optimism is, according to Snow, very much needed for the rest of humanity. Turning then to the other culture, he just says that he doesn't want to defend the un-defendable but that luckily certain literary sensibilities last only for one generation! What Snow does here is not dismantling the commonplaces but adding to them. And, as we all know, the ugly aspect of commonplaces is that they are hard to get rid of. In fact, even though the natural sciences did not save the world (and this was Snow's major argumentation – or should one say 'dream'?) they did *win* the hearts of the larger public and the university institution, changing it in their favor.

A couple of months ago, the American developmental psychologist Jerome Kagan found it necessary to 'revive' this discussion about the two cultures, he wrote a book entitled *The Three Cultures*<sup>10</sup>. What is most interesting for the discourse I have embarked upon is that in this intriguing work that basically addresses the different methodologies of the *three* scientific cultures – methodological differences that according to Kagan can be seen as majorly responsible for the great lack of communication between the sciences –, the author offers us a good résumé of the developments of these three cultures in the university since Snow's time.

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What has basically happened and changed, and this was not predicted by Snow, regards the structural re-formation of the university institution. The enormous progress and the successes of the natural sciences brought along large amounts of governmental and private grants. Soon deans and provosts, as Kagan continues, started to acknowledge this new money and rewarded the scholars responsible for this. As this proceeded, a firm asymmetry between the sciences within the university was created. This probably does not sound wrong or incorrect in principle. But unfortunately the privileged situation of the natural scientist started to be considered as ‘natural’ and the natural scientists (and, yes, this is a generalization!) did no longer feel embarrassed to demonstrate their utter lack of interest in the other scientific cultures. Kagan himself goes even further stating that scientists “began to display some arrogance”.<sup>11</sup> In fact, as Kagan finishes, scientists have lost their humility, and this humility is of a complete different sort than the one confronted above. A loss of humility that has only allowed bullying to grow as I will try to show in what follows.

### **3. The Age of (Structural) Bullying**

Let's face it, the humanities are a luxury that should be left to fend for itself for funding by bamboozling rich but daft philanthropists. What have the humanities actually delivered in the past 200 years? Have they revolutionized society in the way technology has repeatedly done? Have they improved the quality of life by curing diseases? Have their insights led to a better understanding of how the world / universe works and our place in it? No. The best one can hope from the humanities is that their currency of ideas might somehow rein in the excesses of superstition and intolerance, but that hasn't happened either. It's time the humanities had to justify their existence the way those of us working in objective fields do - and time that their government funding was cut and reallocated if they cannot rise to that challenge.<sup>12</sup>

This is a response by Alex Duggan from the 24th of June of 2008 to an article by professor Kevin Sharpe of the University

of London on the need for the humanities to start working together. In all honesty, I don't know who Alex Duggan is. He doesn't seem to be a professor but, as he says that he is working in an 'objective field' he proclaims to be a scientist. And exactly this is the most interesting aspect of his comment. It is the perfect conclusion and summery of what I have tried to show in precedence.

This statement by Duggan is in fact a combination of the turnaround of Kant's interpretation and Snow's accusation of the non-scientific culture of not helping the world to become a better place. I already hinted at the fact that by a strange 'coincidence' Kant's interpretation of the lower philosophy faculty as the absolutely free faculty – and this because of it's uselessness for state purposes (which obviously for Kant meant the highest possible form of thinking and of science) – would start haunting it. Well, exactly this freedom and this form of direct uselessness have now become the main accusation.

Somewhat generalizing, I don't think it would be that mistaken to say that 'scientists' no longer feel embarrassed to publicly claim that they have never read any novel, nor that they don't particularly care about the history or the moral implications of their science. Some are even more than willing to start questioning the right of public and institutional existence of the humanities. And yes, this is somewhat of a generalization but as such it is also the ascertainment of a trend in the university and the wider world that cannot be denied – and literature on this topic, especially coming from the humanities self, underwrites this all too well.

#### **4. Some Final Thoughts**

In conclusion, I would like to mention some other themes very closely related to bullying in the university which I haven't been able to confront in this paper, after which I will end with an anecdote about the difference in funding of the diverse departments.

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1. Very recently there has been a somewhat powerful discussion in English Universities as there is going to be a new funding reform. The Minister of Higher Education in the UK, David Lammy, said some weeks ago that “I want the REF to send a strong signal and give a strong financial incentive for departments to not only do excellent research, but also find ways of helping turn that into impacts that benefit the economy and society as a whole”.<sup>13</sup> It does seem that this ‘impact-factor’ will also have a rather high percentage in total calculation of the final result.

2. In March of this very year there was a threat of closing the philosophy faculty at the university of Liverpool (also politics and statistics were threatened with closure). The main reason given was the wish to become a strong research-led university and thus faculties with poor RAE were to be cut. It did not matter if the recruiting and teaching was done well! Luckily the threat was not made into reality, but still, this all seems to be part of the same trend I talked about before.

3. Last but not least, there is also the less structural and more personal form of bullying that can and sometimes does take place in the university. In Italy there are frequent cases of (family-) protectionism that can without much doubt be classified under the epitaph of bullying. (A recent case even covered a professor defending this particular form of bloodline protectionism claiming that family-members of professors had a more appropriate ‘forma mentis’.) I also think that some investigation in the review processes for articles could bring forth some rare occasion of bullying. And what about country differences and the evaluation of scholars coming from different countries? Are they totally free of bullying?

These are just some examples of what one could call some demonstrations of this form of academic bullying. Obviously this would all not have been possible were it not combined with bureaucratic and even political changes and interference.

Let me however end in a somewhat happier tone by finishing with a rather funny anecdote. Arguing, the mythical story goes, on who should receive what amount of funding, the sciences were divided according to their working methodology. Applied sciences, deciding committee argued, needed machines and tools and all different kind of materials for them to be able to work. This meant that they needed a lot of money. The theoretical sciences were a lot cheaper as they needed just pen and paper and a trashcan to throw away their badly drawn or badly calculated theories. Then there were the Humanities. They were the cheapest of all (and would receive less funding obviously). Just as the theoretical scientists they needed pen and paper, but contrary to those scientists they did not need a trashcan as they didn't have to throw away their bad writings!

## Notes

1 Still today, in Papal universities, if you want to study theology you need a bachelor's degree in philosophy.

2 Cfr. VERGER J., *Patterns*, in *A History of the University in Europe* vol. 1 *Universities in the Middle Ages*, W. Ruëgg (gen. ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, p. 42. For the sake of the argument It should be added that places where philosophy was taught were only considered as *studia generalia*, and thus granted the university status, when they were associated with one of the three higher faculties.

3 Cfr. Cfr. VERGER J., *Teachers*, in *A History of the University in Europe* vol. 1 *Universities in the Middle Ages*, W. Ruëgg (gen. ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, p. 160-163.

4 The example of Thomas shows that also theologians were not free to say whatever they wanted. Becoming a philosophizing theologian was also a rather dangerous road to embark upon.

5 In fact, if the teacher refused to recant his erroneous teachings he could be condemned of being a heretic.

6 KANT I., *The Conflict of the Faculties*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 1992, p. 24: "drei obern Facultäten und [...] einer untern"

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8 I have used the Italian translation I possess: Charles P. SNOW, *Le Due Culture*, Marsilio Editori, Venezia, 2005.

9 Cfr. SNOW, *Le Due Culture*, p. 20-22.

10 Jerome KAGAN, *The Three Cultures – Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, and the Humanities in the 21st Century*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2009.

11 KAGAN, *The Three Cultures*, ix. Kagan repeats this affirmation in his rather pessimistic conclusive thoughts stating that "[...] most scientists feel no embarrassment over their lack of interest in the philosophy or history of their discipline. [...] it's a waste of time to worry too much about meta-matters. One should simply go on with the work because renewal of one's grant and gaining promotion require productivity." KAGAN, *The Three Cultures*, p. 260. This last remark can almost not make one think of Stanley Fish's articles *Take This Job and Do It: Administering the University without an Idea* (*Critical Inquiry*, 31 (Winter 2005), 271-285) and *Professor, Do your Job* (*Policy Review*, 150 (August & September 2008)) and available at:

<http://www.hoover.org/publications/policyreview/26074024.html>).

12 Alex Duggan's response to Kevin Sharpe's article *We need a flagship to lead the humanities fleet to fighting fitness* in *Times Higher Education* of 19-06-2008. Available at: <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=402451>.

13 Phil Baty, *Lammy demands 'further and faster' progress towards economic impact*, in *Times Higher Education*, 10 September 2009. Available at: <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=408111>.

14 Follow the style sheets provided for endnotes. Remember that Oxford Style requires some differences between references in endnotes and references in the bibliography.

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