



Introduction — Academic Freedom in Africa: Between Local Powers and International Donors

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This issue re-addresses a recurring but indeed an important theme, that of academic freedom, in Africa. In most African countries, the traditional threats to the exercise of academic freedom, the political authorities who fear the relentless pursuit of truth, inherent in any scientific research activity still remain, even as new local and international ones emerge. Unwittingly or not, scientists can necessarily, with their discoveries, inventions or innovations, challenge dominant socio-political discourses, or even holders of knowledge or obsolescent technology. This is why scientists, as stated by UNESCO, ‘should be able to fulfill their functions without any discrimination whatsoever and without fear of restrictive or repressive measures by the state or any other source’.

But let us first make the following observation: the restrictions and prohibitions exercised on academic freedom are no longer limited to the African continent or the so-called ‘developing’ countries; but even in Western countries, prominent academics are now sanctioned or forced to waive certain scientific discoveries that involve commercial interests. Certainly, the slight difference is that in such countries, attacks on academic freedom mainly affect scientists whose works challenge dominant interests that are not political but rather economic and financial; globalization, that has become an

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instrument of domination, coincides with the privatization of science and knowledge production. Now, scientific truth is highlighted only if it serves the private interests and, under certain conditions, national interests. Increasingly, the globalization of knowledge and the privatization of its practice have brought new international threats to academic freedom within local realities in developing societies.

The emergence of 'new imperialisms', to use Caffentzis's (2004) phrase, in the form of increased neo-liberal advocacy for the privatization of public universities, and consequently the production and consumption of knowledge; and the emerging advocacy for internationalization of higher education accompanied by new GATS regulations, have all been tailored to redefine academic freedom as the freedom to make money from ideas in an international market for intellectual property goods (Caffentzis 2004). The resultant tension in the exercise of academic freedom that academics, especially in Africa, find themselves in revolves around allegiance to the more local and traditional commitment to academic work, which defines academic freedom as commitment to knowledge as a common resource for all, education as a public good, and academic freedom as the enlarging of the capacity of all to access and produce knowledge; and the neoliberal notion of academic freedom which takes knowledge to be a commodity, education as a service to be privatized and academic freedom as the ability to market knowledge and education services without governmental regulation (Caffentzis 2004).

The emergence of new threats has been accompanied by newer forms of censorship. The new censorship of academic freedom has started to manifest itself in this part of the world since the scope of the struggles for economic domination shifted from quantitative reproduction capabilities, based on stability rather than technological renewal,¹ to qualitative production, based instead on innovation and the pace of technology renewal. Economic competitiveness, with its financial repercussions, has extended beyond the boundaries of industrial enterprises to enter the academic world which it has eventually subjected to its logic. This results in a reorientation of the large fields of scientific research that resort to the funding by the state, itself subjected to both economic and financial interests, and the private sector.

What then is the emerging situation in Africa with regard to academic freedom and intellectual production? Far from being aroused by some intense competitiveness or economic competition, attacks on academic freedom in our continent are mainly motivated by political interests. Political power as mundane as that of a military-political regime or a dictatorship

hooking to clan supports is still commonplace in the continent. If, in developed countries, censorship is mainly exercised by powerful private business entities which fund or help fund research, in Africa, it is mainly practiced and assumed by holders of state power for purposes of domination based on ethnic-client relationships rather than on the requirements of economic and intellectual creativity, as evidenced from the 2011 eight months closure of Chancellor College in Malawi.²

Of course, political power may be everywhere driven, to paraphrase Manuel Castells (1996), by political profit maximization rather than economic profit maximization. The fact remains that it is in the socio-political systems, whose base is economic in nature, that science finds conditions for development, creativity and innovation, ceases to be *logos* to become *technê*. This does not prevent resistance to technological change from coming from the most unexpected environments, like some generations of engineers who cannot bear the questioning of a technical-organizational model they conceived and on which their careers are built.

In the West, it is economic power, as noted by Evry Schatzman (1989), which exploited knowledge and accelerated the convergence of economic power with political power. This explains the collusion between different forms of relatively autonomous power centers. Political power economic power, scientific power and, more recently, the power of users, environmentalists ...; and it is this collusion which some theorists of the sociology of science call ‘arrangement that occurs between different actors intervening so that discoveries, inventions or simple ideas are transformed into technological advancement’. It is also necessary to add that this is not a rentier or speculative economy, but a productive and creative economy. However, in most African countries, ‘political profits’ are not based on ‘economic profits’ related to productivity, the powers that have been succeeding one another since independence remain, with rare exceptions, rentier and speculative in nature.

As a result, academics have contended continually with networks whose power does not owe much to scientific creativity and even less to technological innovation. Moreover, they fear any form of innovation, being unable to assume the economic and social conversions it involves, the technological changes resulting necessarily in sociopolitical changes. While the global trend is towards profits from innovation, which is still inextricably linked to freedom of thought, Africa is still at a standstill, if not going backward, abandoning attempts of industrialization and mechanization of agriculture, and has returned to the rentier regime, depending on royalties paid by multinationals,

through which the latter eventually remain as the only ones with the capacity to tap Africa's natural resources. Thus, Africa continues to record declines because under such a management approach, any logic or scientific reasoning can only be subversive and treated as such.

At the same time, the economic 'crisis', in Africa, has weighed heavily on teaching needs, while marginalizing scientific activities in universities. When available, a large percentage of higher education budgets is devoted to meeting teaching needs, often paying little or no attention to research. The freeze of wages and the recruitment of teachers is such that the number of students, though they represent very modest numbers compared to advanced countries, is a crushing burden for teachers and available infrastructure. This situation impoverishes teachers and considerably reduces their scientific performance; funding for research is in most cases maintained by donors who tie such funding to external interests. Donors, who have virtually become the only sources of funding, now exercise considerable influence, sometimes with the support of university administration, not only on the orientation and the choice of research fields, but also on research itself, often reduced to mere collections of information and therefore, beyond the academic freedom, on the very existence of science produced in Africa by Africans.

Indeed, in most developed countries, university administrations also tend to commit themselves in favor of donors, but this is a bias backed by economic interests of international scope, and not by sectarian political interests or power. In Africa, scientists are censored or punished not because they defend the principle of sharing and moral value of knowledge, like in some Western powers, but because their work bothers the conscience of those in power and their control over public property. Moreover, the economic dynamics, like any other form of social dynamics, is inconsistent with the routine and the political *status quo*.

The inadequacy or lack of public funding drives academics, whether they like it or not, to submit to the logic of both local and international interests, which interests usually undermine the objective pursuance of academic freedom. Yet, embracing such logic does not and has not addressed the needs of universities, or the needs of those researchers who have put themselves at their disposal. Donor funding covers only a small part of the research engagement. Most research in universities, whether socially useful or not, is mostly funded by public money that covers regular salaries of researchers and sometimes their subsistence. In Africa, there is no question of criticizing the research formulated in terms of business objectives, whether

it applies to industry, agriculture or health, but also modes of financing that lead to the marginalization of research for the benefit of ‘expertise’ or, worse, simple collection of data whose authors ignore its scientific purpose and how it is to be used.

Three facts seem to converge or complement one another, as reflected in articles published in this issue: the rise of the international donors and the dependence of researchers on them, the hardening of political power against academic freedom, and the shrinking or rather disappearance of public funding for research. In addition, survival salaries are among the factors that threaten academic freedom most. Increasingly, threats to academic freedom are coming, not only from the external, but also from within the universities and the academics themselves. To meet their basic needs, researchers are forced to submit to any financial power interested in their expertise or knowledge in a given sector. The ‘research reports’ generally required by donors are just based on token research; they often tend to move away from scientific analytical works and confine themselves to information about their areas of expertise.

Against this background, many of the researchers commissioned by donors confine themselves to producing simple investigation reports, without increasing research efforts and taking the necessary time for thorough scientific analyses, thereby threatening the advancement of science from within the universities themselves. The dominant trend is to develop ‘expertise’ to the detriment of ‘research’, thus ignoring the difference between the two, without knowing that while the expert works on the mastery of known knowledge, the researcher goes beyond established knowledge to make discoveries or inventions that may result (as time and cost effective as possible) in social or technological innovations. When disinterested donors and the state stop funding research, lack of resources compels researchers to shift their focus from scientific and technological research to specialist work. So, collecting and disseminating data or known knowledge has now outpaced the discovery and invention of new knowledge. The onslaught of neo-liberalism in African universities and the withdrawal of the state have therefore exposed institutions to new pressures that limit academic freedom. Some of the pressures are emanating from the academics themselves and border on a lack of feminist ethics to anchor academic freedom and social responsibility, as articulated by Amina Mama. Academics, on their part, have succumbed to the urge for monetary gain as the measure of academic freedom, as the intellectual project of the institutions and the accompanying social responsibility are abandoned, as Oanda Ogachi argues in his article.

In an attempt to meet the requirements of neoliberal globalization, universities tend to slip away from their social function to abide by conditions set by the international financial systems. Motivated solely by the material conditions of life, the new model is limited to the production and dissemination of information to donors. Already oriented from the outset to specific themes, this data hardly goes through all the thorough steps required by scientific analysis. The subordination of academia to business interests has eventually drawn a boundary between the information gathering and scientific creativity activities. Therefore, research has lost its original purpose, or *raison d'être*, to be reduced to simple functions of expertise, far from its initial goal of achieving innovation and discoveries. Financial challenges add to legal constraints. In Botswana, Taolo Lucas shows how the government leverages its capacity to legislate, i.e. that of producing tailored laws, to muzzle academic freedom. A legal arsenal, such as the 'Media Practitioners and Security and Intelligence Act', defines the restrictions; thus it does not prohibit the principle per se, but any reference to freedom outside the academic realm, which amounts, in fact, to excluding any academic discussion on access to social life.

The use of legal provisions as instruments to stifle academic freedom is also commonplace in Nigeria. As Elijah Adewale Taiwo points out, laws such as the 'National Universities Commission and the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board Act' have ended up, directly or indirectly, centralizing power and eroding the autonomy of universities. Though it is admitted, as Taiwo observes, that these laws can certainly be useful in some cases, the education system, the bureaucratic mode of operation they impose and their implications eventually erode the notions of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Finally, systematic surveillance, intimidation and partisan appointment of officials tend to turn self-censorship, submission, conformity and consent into rules of survival.

With regard to the peer reviewing process of scientific publications emanating from African universities, Elizabeth Ayalew flags the question of objectivity that the evaluators of articles and academic papers are expected to demonstrate. The author shows that academic freedom is not altered only from outside. Internal interference can also, insofar as they affect the operation of the scientific community, compromise it. She points to the tendency in certain practices of peer review to censor, voluntarily or not, the laws that are outside their dogma; these provisions are discarded either because they convey an unrecognized originality, or because they facilitate

the sharing of information and thus break the preset unfair monopolies of knowledge. By putting restrictions on the production of objective knowledge, the process of peer review could ultimately undermine the objectives it is supposed to achieve.

Proposing to go beyond a homogenizing vision, Abdoulaye Gueye analyzes the university as a place of diverse activities. Reflection on academic freedom leads to a questioning of power within the academia in its diversity and its contradictions. For this author, academic freedom is evaluated at two levels. The first is the exercise of power relations between the actors of academic institution who are heterogeneous and conflicting. The second is the relationships between these actors and the outer world. The novelty of this article relates to its attempt to broaden the scope of academic freedom, which is often reduced to a rather homogenized professional group, to other social forces such as the one posed by students. Far from being a homogeneous milieu, the university, and society as a whole, represents ‘a hierarchical space’ based on differences in identity, academic, ethnic or religious affiliation. This diversity is not without effect on academic freedom, often granted differently and unequally, depending on the capital facilities available, the position occupied within the hierarchy and the power of deterrence.

The article by Goin Bi Zamble Theodore analyzes the effects of a situation of hyper-politicization of both teachers and students on the exercise of academic freedom. The article suggests that even the political commitment of academics can be a barrier to academic freedom. Defenders of the principle of academic freedom, such as teachers unions and groups can become, once in power, the worst rivals of that very principle. Any commitment to academic freedom posits that lecturers are able to devote themselves primarily to the respect of the criteria of objectivity, central to any scientific activity. In the case presented by the author, state power threatens academic freedom less than academics, teachers and students, especially when they are unable to overcome the conflicts of interest facing them. Thus, in this context witnessed in Ivory Coast, ‘the state, which has always seen the university as a centre of protest and destabilization, has drawn huge benefits from the strong disunity among academics’.

With regard to pursuing the mirage of global recognition by universities in Africa, the article by Issac Kamola, based on what he calls the ‘Mamdani affair at the University of Cape Town’, demonstrates the contradictions

between individual academic commitment to intellectual objectivity and institutional bending to external interests that are more economic than academic. In the debate exposed here, the academia is facing the problem, well known in Western countries, of the dominance of economic power, and beyond the state, over the guiding principles of education and scientific research. Through the conflict experienced by Professor Mamdani, the author shows that the struggle waged by scientists in the West, unfortunately rare, against the exploitation of research for commercial purposes is increasingly gaining ground in Africa.

The ideological fiction of drawing a dividing line between ‘Applied Research’ and ‘Fundamental Research’ aims to marshal and channel funding dedicated to scientific research towards short-term private interests rather than public interests which can also be sequenced over the long term. De-nounced by scientists as detrimental to scientific research, the claim of prioritizing the development of ‘applied’ research continues to weigh on universities, as if theory and practice, concrete and abstract, could thrive independently. However, subjects which are said to be purely theoretical and abstract, like mathematics, proved the most creative of innovative, practical and marketable goods, especially in the field of new technologies, where the ‘fundamental’ and ‘applied’ dimensions are intertwined, though they are abstract.

Taken together, these articles show the diversity of problems facing any researcher concerned with scientific objectivity. In Africa, leaders of universities, appointed by the state, set themselves up more as the representatives of political power than their peer academics. Even when political freedom is respected, financial dependence compels the university to still operate under a ‘subtle stroke’ of pressure from the government through its funding agencies. Thus, though the government’s discourse tends to be supportive of academic freedom, a certain form of control is always exerted on oneself or stimulated by bureaucratic mechanisms. The reason is that the financial grip on science is going global. Even in the US and Europe, many scientists denounce the influence of political and financial powers, accused of looting public resources. An increasing number of multinational companies have taken control of research laboratories, as the case of Novartis at the University of California shows. The reality is different, even in the US, from the appeal launched by UNESCO in 1999, stating that ‘It belongs to the state (...) to respect and ensure the autonomy of its institutions and academic freedom’.

Notes

1. Demand being, unlike today, superior to supply.
2. At Chancellor College, a lecturer discussed the political developments that led to the overthrow of dictatorships in Egypt and Tunisia. He was later interrogated by the Chief of Police. Fellow lecturers reacted swiftly, that they would no longer teach unless they were guaranteed academic freedom, which is when President Bingu wa Mutharika weighed in, accusing the lecturers of influencing students to overthrow his government and precipitating the closure of college.

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