

The problem with the transfiguration of the independence of the university

(English translation of op-ed by Philipp Aerni in NZZ, 26.12.2021)

In his recent op-ed, Markus Müller portrays the university as a place "of integrity, independence and reliability" in a sea of fake news, conspiracy theories and fraud. The university as a church built on a rock to resist the powers of the underworld? Hardly.

In the last part of the tetralogy of Thomas Mann's opus magnum "Joseph and his Brothers" there is a chapter (the dreams of the Pharaoh) that is of high contemporary relevance: The young Pharaoh Akhenaten is agitated by his two dreams of the seven fat and the seven lean cows as well as the healthy and the sick ears of corn.

As a result, he consults the scholarly class close to the temple to have his dreams interpreted and thus to recognize the signs of the times. The scholars from the priestly class were quasi the professors of ancient Egypt. They explain to the Pharaoh that their art was to know which sources to consult in order to find well-founded answers to certain questions.

The scholars exchange ideas and then present various interpretations of the dream to the Pharaoh. They are all based on unquestioned basic assumptions of the divinity 'science' of the time. Akhenaten is disappointed by the incomprehensible casuistry. In search of alternatives, his chief cupbearer suggests that he bring the young Joseph to the court. The latter had correctly interpreted his dream many years ago during his short time in prison. Akhenaten is curious about this "outsider" and has him brought in.

Joseph, the economist

Joseph is able to impress the Pharaoh not only with his plausible dream interpretation, but also with his intelligent and practical thoughts on how the Pharaoh could master the famine crisis that the country would face after the end of the predicted seven fat years.

As a result, Joseph is appointed as the Pharaoh's 'prime minister', taking care of all the practical affairs of the country. This allows Akhenaten to devote himself fully to his sun god Aton. The "Aton Project" is also a political initiative to push back the growing influence of the priestly class that adheres to the god-king Amun-Re. It was launched by Amenophis III and carried through in a radical way by his son Akhenaten.

While Akhenaten's radical break with established religious institutions was not particularly well received by the people, Joseph's far-sighted and practical approach to governance enjoyed great popularity.

Joseph's policy of precaution not only saves the country from the famine crisis, but also secures the pharaoh's position of power, both domestically and externally. Joseph, however, does not want to be revered as a prophet, neither by his brothers nor by the Egyptian people, because after all he is only an "economist" who takes care of the budget of the state and the long-term welfare of the people.

However, he did not acquire his knowledge as an economist by studying 'economics', but during his time as the general manager of the large household of Potiphar with all its production and consumption areas. There he learned not just to manage the great amount of resources but also to increase them in a responsible manner. As an originally enslaved foreigner he was however very much aware that he is walking on thin ice in Egyptian society. Haughtiness toward his subordinates

and carelessness toward his superiors would have a fatal effect on his acceptance and thus on his long-term plans.

Implicit criticism of the academic system

With his description of the priestly class of the time, which felt ethically superior, and Joseph's incredible rise in Egypt, Thomas Mann also implicitly criticizes conditions in Europe in the first half of the 20th century. The church may have lost its influence, but the search for meaning and orientation in society by no means diminished because of it.

The faculties of humanities and social sciences at universities filled this vacuum to a certain extent. In the process, science became strongly intermingled with religion and politics, for the secular narratives of scholars were by no means free of implicit promises of salvation, despite their claim to rationality and scientificity. As a result, they contributed not inconsiderably to the establishment of new authoritarian state ideologies. Already back then, these ideologies in academia saw the evil in economic globalization and considered war to be the only way to defend the sovereignty, social justice and interests of the respective country.

Markus Müller zeigt in seinem Gastkommentar, dass das Misstrauen gegenüber der Wirtschaft auch im 21. Jahrhundert immer noch allgegenwärtig ist. Für Müller ist klar, dass die Wissenschaft sich keinesfalls auf eine Zusammenarbeit mit der Wirtschaft einlassen darf, wenn sie ihre Glaubwürdigkeit im Volk bewahren will.

In his guest commentary, Markus Müller shows that distrust of business is still pervasive in the 21st century. For Müller, it is clear that science must under no circumstances engage in cooperation with business if it wants to retain its credibility among the people.

The human factor

According to Müller, the Covid 19 crisis showed how important it was to have an independent class of scientists who could "enlighten, advise and, at best, reassure" by means of relevant information, classifications and forecasts. However, the federally convened Covid-19 Science Task Force did not do much to reassure the nation at the outset of the crisis. Individual members of the task force were even able to create their own media platform with alarmist prophecies.

Müller disapproves of the criticism toward these exponents of science. He calls it disrespectful, because universities would be, after all, places of integrity, independence and reliability, as long as they are not corrupted by business.

This idealistic view of university culture may be due to the fact that Müller, as a full professor of constitutional and administrative law, is hardly familiar with Thomas Kuhn's theory of science. In his groundbreaking book "Structure of Scientific Revolutions", Kuhn showed as early as 1962 that there are indeed "human beings" in the routine processes of science (normal science). After, established scientists are not pillar saints, but strive for power and recognition. In this quest, aspiring scientists who question their theories are often a thorn in their side.

Instead, the uncritical reproducers of knowledge within the established epistemic paradigm tend to be promoted. This selection process may contribute to consensus within a discipline, but in the long run, it may widen the gap between theory and reality. As a consequence, the adherence to the "no longer tenable" becomes more and more an ethical problem, because it blocks advances in science, i.e. the very basis of the legitimacy of protected research institutes.

The accusation that economic interests would endanger the independence of science may be true in some cases. However, too much dependence on third-party funding from foundations and federal agencies can also jeopardize the independence of research, since research is always intended to serve a particular agenda.

Moreover, it is a myth to believe that universities were originally free of dependencies. They were always founded for a specific purpose. ETH Zurich, for example, was not founded to advance basic research, but to support the Swiss economy in developing breakthrough innovations and training talented young people for promising emerging industries. In this respect, it could be said with a clear conscience that Switzerland's success in the 19th century was primarily due to pragmatic and solution-oriented public-private partnerships.

The morals of the "up-and-comer"?

Joseph seemed to understand even then that cooperation in the private sector can be just as pronounced as competition. Joseph acquired his knowledge, however, not through formal education but through concrete life experience. He did not have the privilege of belonging to the upper class, but had to constantly worry about his existence. As a slave, he was not actually entitled to human rights.

Instead, he had to gain recognition and respect in society through hard work, entrepreneurship and a certain touch of mischievousness - at the same time, he always held fast to his ethical principles and his trust in God, because he was aware that his fate was ultimately not determined by himself.

In today's highly polarized discussion about economics and human rights, it would be difficult to classify Joseph. As an economic refugee, he would certainly be entitled to victim status. However, his economic and social rise in society makes him a serious competitor to the privileged established class, which increasingly holds him in low esteem or even contempt.

Therefore, when the established university tries to present itself as the guardian of morality, a skepticism to that toward the established churches is in order. After all, the arguments of their exponents are primarily based on a conventional morality that does not take the trouble to critically examine its own values and norms. Thomas Mann's Joseph narrative is a development novel, which is intended not least to show how man reaches moral maturity through life experience and constant self-examination. It would therefore be a good read for students who still care whether they sit in a church or a lecture hall.