

Struggles for academic freedom in an illiberal democracy - Hungarian academics and students on challenges and opportunities

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

Academic freedom is the ‘lifeblood’ of universities, without which higher education cannot fulfil its societal roles. Restrictions on academic freedom affect social sciences and humanities more often, because these fields focus social problems, with academics often being critical of political and economic actors. In this paper we explore the dilemmas related to academic freedom faced by sociology students and academic staff, drawing on a total of 38 semi-structured, individual interviews conducted with Bachelor's, Master's, and PhD students (n=17) and academics (n=21). This paper has three main contributions; first, we explore staff and student understandings of the broader issues of structural change through the Bologna-process; concerns over mass-participation; and structural changes to higher education funding in Hungary. Second, we discuss challenges of compliance with, and resistance to the regime's workings. Third, the paper looks at student and staff understandings of the potential roles of sociologists under this illiberal regime.

Full paper

Academic freedom is the ‘lifeblood’ (MCO 2020) of universities, without which higher education cannot fulfil its societal roles. It can be defined as “the right, without constriction by prescribed doctrine, to freedom of teaching and discussion, freedom in carrying out research and disseminating and publishing the results thereof, freedom to express freely their opinion about the institution or system in which they work, freedom from institutional censorship and freedom to participate in professional or representative academic bodies.” (UNESCO 1997:III.4)

Over the last decade, concern about the erosion of academic freedom has become increasingly pronounced (e.g. Maasen et al. 2023, Lyer et al. 2023, EP 2024). This trend is visible in Western democracies as well as in dictatorships and autocracies. However, the patterns depend on political systems. Whereas in dictatorships, it is primarily the state that represses academic freedom, in liberal democracies, constraints stem from academic capitalism (e.g. managerialism, dependence on tuition fees; see Hao 2020) and public opinion (e.g. social media).

The situation is particularly interesting, however, in illiberal democracies and other hybrid regimes (Douglass 2022) such as Hungary (Bozoki – Hegedus 2017; Csáky 2020). In these countries, elections are

free, but not fair, because populist governments act as ‘information autocracies’ (Guriev - Treisman 2019) that divide societies by influencing public discourse, creating ‘moral panic buttons’ (Gerő - Sík 2020), fomenting nationalism and culture wars (e.g. gender and religious discourses), and build on this to maintain their parliamentary majority. In these countries, there is no overt governmental repression of academic freedom (hard repression; see Hoffmann - Kinselbach 2018), but rather more indirect techniques to ensure that academics are less able/willing to influence public discourses as independent experts. “Smart repression” techniques include, for example, strengthening self-censorship, deterrence through smearing campaigns, restricting access to the research data, distorting grant and evaluation systems, and reducing the influence of the academic community in governance by increased managerialism. (Kováts - Rónay 2021)

Restrictions on academic freedom affect social sciences and humanities more often, because these fields focus on social problems and academics in these fields are often critical of political and economic actors. In addition, academic activity and social activism often merge in these fields leading to the controversial „scholactivism” (see Farnum 2016; Ramsey 2018).

In our paper, we explore the dilemmas related to academic freedom faced by sociology academics and students working/studying in Hungarian higher education and research institutions.

Design and methods

The data this paper focuses on was collected in the spring of 2020 as part of a broader international comparative research project. The Hungarian sample included 21 academic staff in sociology as well as 17 interviews with Bachelor's, Master's, and PhD students. Students were invited through departmental advertisements and gatekeepers, and participated in an hour-long, individual, semi-structured interview, exploring how they saw the diversity and challenges of the discipline. Academics working in several different institutions were asked in a similar, semi-structured interview about their paths to becoming educators and/or researchers in sociology. The emergent themes of activism and resistance lend themselves well to further interrogation around the challenges and opportunities of sociology and sociologists under an illiberal regime.

Results and discussion

First, this paper will situate student and staff views amongst the broader issues of structural change through the Bologna-process and its unintended consequences; concerns over mass-participation; and recent structural changes to higher education funding. Second, based on academics’ accounts, it will explore the development of the discipline of sociology through the socialist era, the transition to a market economy, and the recent shifts to an illiberal regime. The personal challenges of compliance and resistance are explored through academics’ accounts, both in relation to teaching, research, as well as roles taken on beyond the academy.

Third, the paper will look at students’ understandings of the potential roles of sociologists. These are not exclusive, but perhaps different sides of a person more or less visible to students, such as thinking about social issues; activism; commentating on social issues; setting / informing public policy; doing market research; teaching sociology; researching and theorising. Hungarian sociology students are often themselves active in non-governmental organisations and link their sociological knowledge and skills to

wanting to effect change in society. Academic staff accounts of these diverse roles are more conflicting given the competition for their time, institutional resources, and overall prestige and reward.

The paper will close by reflecting on where the ‘small circles of freedom’, as István Bibó, a famous Hungarian political scientist, put it, might lie in contemporary sociology.

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