

"Parrhesia" and the Modern University

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Abstract: *The present article focuses on a less known concept, namely that of the Greek "parrhesia", which translates into English as free speech. We analyze the occurrence of this ancient concept in the modern institution of the University. Although not taken into account until now the free speech can be considered to be a mark of the academic freedom. The truth is both the main attribute of the free speech and the main purpose of the university as an institution. The professors as members of the academic community can be genuine truth tellers in various situations, such as: in relation to their students, their colleagues and as a researcher in relation with other specialists. The students and the administrative staff also can be users of free speech in certain situations.*

Keywords: *free speech, truth teller, academic freedom, university, academic environment*

1. The history of an institution

Even since ancient time there existed for sure forms of higher education, Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lykeion, but since these institutions weren't structured and formalized organizations we cannot consider them to be the primordial form of existence of the university.

Higher education as we know it today has its roots in the medieval European schools that were preparing clerics and were organized along the great cathedrals of the time. Due to the growing demand these monarchical schools began to organize other courses such as law, medicine and Latin grammar and literature. Therefore the dawn of a new institution appears and in the 12th century the first universities are established at Salerno, Salamanca, Bologna and Paris. "In their beginnings the universities were communities of teachers and students that were organized in guilds or organizations that had the right to self administration and were comprising in general four faculties, those of theology, medicine, law and arts."¹

The system of granting diplomas has remained almost the same few differences appeared since its beginning, the bachelor, the master and the PhD diploma being similar to those offered in modern times and following almost the same criteria. In general the entire academic organization has changed very few since the middle ages "The continuity of the academic culture in universities since its

inception was truly remarkable [...] in fact the general outlines, ranging from the simple academic and student guilds in the 13th century and ending with the complex universities of the 21st century, have barely changed."²

Due to the domination of clerics within universities and to the conservatism, cultural currents such as renaissance and enlightenment were not accepted, the scientific development of 17th and 18th centuries were held outside the universities. The advancement of knowledge in that period is due to the curiosity or to the needs of the craftsmen or inventors, independently from any form of higher education. Because of this conservative system the universities declined and the specialized high schools flourished because they responded to the state's needs by training competent and obedient clerks. After this period of decline in the 19th century Europe the universities are reformed following the humboldtian organizational model according to which the learning was based on inner motivation and pleasure and had as a major task the development of culture in general.

In the 20th century the universities were the centres for the training of specialists, their expansion has been stopped by the two world wars. Nevertheless in the last half of the century the doors of the universities have been widely opened for young men and women from the lower and middle classes. This liberalization of higher education was due to the increasing need

¹ Adrian Hatos, *Sociologia Educației*, p. 53.

² Lionel S. Lewis, *A Complementary Essay*, apud. Liviu Andreescu, *Libertatea academică*, p. 13.

for professionals demanded by the emerging economies that were becoming more and more technological diverse. In the last half of the century the tendency to standardize higher education institutions was obvious, this process culminated in Europe with the 1999 Amsterdam Treaty that set as objective for the European universities to become the number one worldwide force in science and research.

The modern university has become more than the halidom for science and research, being also an important and crucial part of the community to which they belong and without which the economic progress, the prosperity and the culture of its members would be impossible. This complexity is the main reason why we chose to subject the modern academia to the test of an ancient concept, that of *free speech*. In our attempt we first define this less known Greek term of *parrhesia* and afterwards we try to identify it within the nowadays academia of a collegial university.

2. Defining "parrhesia"

The term "parrhesia" first appeared in ancient Greece Euripides in the fifth century BC. Etymologically the word *parrhesiazesthai* means *to say everything* being composed from *pan* that means *everything* and *rhema* meaning *all that it is said*.

Free speech is the usual English term for *parrhesia* and we will be using henceforth this translation to designate this Greek concept. A less frequent term relating to *free speech* is that of "parrhesiastes", the one who speaks the truth and that we will refer to as *truth teller*.

We can distinguish two meanings of the *free speech* namely a pejorative one which designates the chattering of a person that is not qualified to say everything on his mind and the second one, a positive meaning which relates to the telling of truth.

The main characteristics that the *free speech* relates to are: frankness, truthfulness, danger, criticism and duty. *Frankness* is one of the defining attributes of the *free speech* because the speaker tries to express as directly as possible what he really thinks, unlike rhetoric where the orator uses specific technical devices to convince his audience of something that doesn't represent necessarily his own beliefs. The user of the *free speech* avoids the rhetorical forms that could hide the true meaning of his utterances and he chooses to use the most direct forms of expression he can find. By *free speech*, one besides being concise is always *true*

because the truth teller always says what it is true and "there is always a coincidence between belief and truth"³. The fact that the truth tellers are certain that they are in possession of the truth comes from the idea that someone that has certain moral qualities has guaranteed access to the truth. Both features of a truth teller those of having access to the truth and the ability to share it with other persons are considered to be the "parrhesiastic game"⁴.

A difficult task is that of identifying a genuine truth-teller, one clue would be that of the courage to contradict the opinion of the majority. The truth-teller is the one that takes a risk, the one that chooses to tell the truth in spite of some *danger*. The extreme manifestation of this danger is that of death and there are numerous in history the examples of those that have chosen to tell the truth and die than be untrue to themselves.

The *free speech* represents a game between a truth-teller and his interlocutor, the danger comes from the risk of angering or upsetting the other person in the conversation and this usually happens by criticizing his actions or ideas. From this it is easily deducible that another main function of the *free speech* is that of criticism. There are two kinds of criticism, the one directed to others and self-criticism.

The question that emerges in everyone's minds is why someone will expose oneself in order to tell the truth and the answer is very simple, the sense of *duty*. The truth teller risks a punishment for his uttering the truth and he knows that, the sense of moral obligation is the one that makes him do so. Therefore the *free speech* is "a kind of verbal activity where the speaker has a specific relation to truth and frankness, a certain relationship to his own life through danger, a certain type of relation to himself or other people through criticism (self-criticism or criticism of other people), and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty."⁵

2.1. The evolution of free speech

As every other concept the one of *free speech* has evolved since its appearance and Michel Foucault analyses this evolution from three points of view, namely regarding its relations to rhetoric, politics and philosophy. The first evolution aspect regards in its beginnings

³ Michel Foucault, *Discourse and Truth: The problematization of parrhesia*, p. 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

the *free speech* as the total opposite of rhetoric, where the long speech was prevailing as opposing the dialogue through questions and answers, the typical device for the *free speech*. Later on at the beginning of the Roman Empire the *free speech* is incorporated in rhetoric, being a sort of completely natural rhetorical figure intended to intensify the emotions of the audience. A natural rhetorical figure is the zero degree of rhetorical elements.

Relating to politics the *free speech* evolved from its appearance in the fifth century until the Hellenistic period, changing shapes over time and according to historical circumstances. In the beginning the *free speech* was one of the main characteristics of the Athenian democracy because in the agora every citizen had the right to participate in the decision making process by having the right to speech. This right was at the time controversial because the *free speech* could have been used even by the most ignorant and immoral citizens thus meaning that the very Achilles' heel for democracy was one of its main characteristics. The Athenians would not distinguish between good and bad truth tellers but they chose to accept only the speakers that were uttering what they wanted to hear, the speakers that were opposing the demos were not taken into consideration. Therefore the real *free speech* in its positive, constructive meaning it's incompatible with true democracy. At the time many were those that condemned the ill understood democratic system, considering that only a few educated should decide for the ignorant crowd, because the freedom of speech was increasingly understood as freedom in the choice of one's way of life thus creating chaos. Later on after the death of Alexander the Great a new era begins in the history of Greece when the great Empire divides and monarchies emerge. In this historical context the *free speech* moves from the agora to the court of the monarch and the citizens lose their right to decision making, becoming the absent member in the game of truth telling. A good monarch accepted criticism from his advisors, which were using *free speech* in order to prevent the power abuse. In its relation with philosophy the *free speech* evolved from the idea of care from oneself to a genuine technique of education of the soul.

2.2. Free speech and the human relations

Michel Foucault identifies three main kinds of human relationships that imply the *free speech*, namely the small groups of people (the community life), the public life and the individual

personal life. Along with these three manifestations of *free speech* there is also the *Socratic parrhesia* that leads the hearer to give an account of his life. Giving an account of one's life does not mean to do an autobiography but show that there is concordance between the one's way of life and the one's way of speech or discourse. Therefore the link between logos and bios is illustrated by Socrates' belief that „I take the speaker and his speech together, and observe how they sort and harmonize with each other“.⁶This kind of *free speech* aims at determining the hearer to choose a way of life in accordance with logos, courage and truth.

The manifestation of *free speech* in small groups of peoples or within a community, for example in a group of people someone speaks the truth to others and each engages in this process thus coming to mutual confession, every member in turn disclosing thoughts, faults and misbehavior. Often the process of discovering the truth about one self and confessing it within a group, implied the guidance of a master that taught his students by speaking the truth. This manifestation of *free speech* was compared to the art of medicine and to the art of piloting a boat because in both arts theoretical knowledge and practical training is required and the particular circumstances are the ones that matter in the development of a situation. Also in all the three arts, piloting, medicine and *free speech* there is a person that exercises power and authority and others that must obey. Therefore the *free speech* can be seen here as a philosophical practice or as the art of spiritual guidance and the teacher can be considered a philosopher that guides himself and others towards inner discovery.

The public display of one's life represents a mark of his relation with the truth. A very transparent way of life gave credit to the truth tellers making them genuine ones. The aspiration of making their life an example worthy of being followed wanted to be achieved by the essential truths that were comprised within each existence. The perfect illustration of this public display of life are the representatives of the cynicism "The Cynic idea that a person is nothing else but his relation to truth, and that this relation to truth takes shape or is given form in his own life"⁷. The Cynics had three main types of utilizing *free speech*: critical preaching, scandalous behaviour and provocative dialogue. The critical preaching is not a new concept, we have spoken already about it therefore it is not

⁶ Michel Foucault, p. 39.

⁷ Michel Foucault, p. 44.

an innovation of the cynics. They would preach in front of a big crowd, the characteristic of their preaching was that they were encouraging people to live a moderate life, they were criticizing the moral codes and the political institutions, thus resembling early Christianity. The Cynics were preaching against all institutions that were limiting the citizen life, they were living examples of the natural way of life, free from social dependencies, they were resembling the Christian apostles. The scandalous behaviour that they had was meant to draw attention upon themselves and their way of life. By the scandalous acts they were indirectly criticizing the habits of the crowds, the institutional rules, the social constraints and most importantly, the standards of decency. The provocative dialogue is a technique by which the cynics provoked their interlocutor by attacking their pride and leading them to the awareness of their own ignorance.

Within personal relationships the *free speech* has a very important role at personal level. Every person has a self-love relationship with oneself, therefore reality is distorted and everyone needs within the boundaries of personal life a genuine truth-teller that will help one get to the state of self-knowledge. The criteria by which a truth teller can be recognized are identified by Foucault in the early writings of Plutarch, namely the conformity between speech and acts and the permanence, the continuity, the stability and steadiness regarding choices, options and ideas. It is hard to differentiate between a truth teller and a flatterer because everyone is his own flatterer and no one is interested in finding out the opposite. The truth teller is best to be neutral, a person that at first sight gives honest counsel and expresses opinions without being emotionally involved.

3. The modern university - the ideal environment for the *free speech*

It's hard to identify a genuine truth teller even more nowadays in the modern society, a society governed by the rules of financial welfare and flattery. However the place where the modern genuine truth tellers can be easily found is the University. The academic institution represents the ideal environment for the achievement of truth in its purest form by repeatedly passing it through the critical vision of the academics and of the students in the classroom. The expression of points of view more or less elaborated along with the research process can be a means of achieving the truth. The university "among other fundamental

functions has the one of directly engaging in the search for truth... Truth is not anymore just an indirect byproduct of the individual interests of social actors as it is happening in society, but it is one of the main purposes of the university and it is pursued directly, knowingly and systematically."⁸

The search and spreading of the truth is protected within the academic environment by the academic freedom, the academics being the ones most suitable to lead an endless journey in search of truth. John Stuart Mill considers that every truth is being discovered when the minds of the people are ready for it "if there is a deeper truth, it will be discovered once the human spirit will be able to recognize it, and meanwhile we can be sure we got as close to the truth to the extent that it was possible to do it"⁹.

By definition the academics are the moral, rightful persons that are in possession of the truth discovered by research and passed on to others by teaching. In order to use genuine *free speech* a professor must be frank, must tell the truth, must be critical, must regard telling the truth as a duty to be fulfilled and must subject himself to some danger by uttering the truth. Taking into account all these attributes a professor that is teaching electronics or literature to his students and he is sure of the truth of his lectures, is not a truth teller because he doesn't subject himself to any danger. This is not the case of a professor that teaches subjects forbidden by a totalitarian regime (see Fig. 1), he chooses to use *free speech* without being compelled to and therefore becomes a truth teller. Another case of *free speech* use is that when a professor discovers and supports an innovative theory that contradicts all the existing theories that are supported by other specialists. The initiator of such a theory risks being excluded from various scientific forums for the courage of delivering and supporting a revolutionary theory, that will prove to be true, although academic freedom should protect the academics from such abuse.

Although numerous classification models exist the most widespread classification is that of the six types of academic organization, namely: the collegial university, the market coordinated university (the political university), the bureaucratic oligarchic university, the statist-bureaucratic university, statist-corporate university and the entrepreneurial or managerial university.

⁸ Liviu Andreescu, *Libertatea academica*, Editura Institutul European, Iași, 2010, p. 25.

⁹ John Stuart Mill, *Despre libertate*, p. 31.

Depending on the Universities' organization the functions of the actors of the academic community vary.

In Romania the universities have a collegial type of administration, meaning that the institutions are run by elected members from the University's Senate and the faculties are run by deans also elected from among colleagues thus becoming a *primus inter pares*. Although the differences in status should remain relatively low there are cases when the elected one turns into a dictator imposing decisions and ignoring everyone's right of participating to decision making. A case of *free speech* use may appear when a professor that speaks his opinion in these conditions, risking sanctions for criticizing the leader's decision (see Fig. 1). Also a user of the *free speech* is the professor that in the collegial administration chooses to confront the majority by opposing to the decisions that are taken with the risk of being despised, hated or even excluded. "The collegial university is predisposed to the tyranny of the majority. The minor ideas including those manifested in teaching and engaged in research projects are in danger of being suppressed by the authority of the many."¹⁰

Although such organizations enjoy the privilege of not being subject to external pressures, pressures arise within the academic community, pressure to adhere to common values or pressures of exclusion for the nonconformists. These pressures occur on informal ways as well as other interactions between the actors of this sort of organization.

In relation with the student, a professor can be a truth teller, from a psychological point of view, because it engages in a Socratic parhesiastic¹¹ game, in which, by using a succession of questions and answers, the student is proven that he is ignorant in a matter that he claimed to know.

Until now we have spoken of professors without differentiating between the positions each occupies, but free speech may appear even between different categories of professors. For example an assistant professor may use the free speech in order to criticize the actions, ideas or researches of an associate professor or of a full professor (see Fig. 1). The most affected in these circumstances are the young professionals that aren't completely integrated and not considered equals of the experienced professors. All the hypostasis in which we analyzed the professor until now defines him as a member of

a community, namely the academic community. In relation with the non-professional¹² relationships in which the same truth telling professor engages we can't consider them to be necessarily governed by the rules of *free speech*, although a genuine truth teller is stable in regard to choices, options and ideas.

The academic community has other members aside from the professors the students and the administrative staff completes the university scheme. The students can be at their turn truth tellers when they confront a professor by engaging in a contradictory discussion and proving the latter to be wrong with the risk of attracting his spite and hostility (see Fig. 1).

The administrative staff in a collegial university has fewer rights than the academics, being subordinated to the collegial governing organisms, being purely executive and carrying out accomplishment of the decisions. We can speak of *free speech* even in this situation when an administrative speaks frankly the truth in front of the academics risking sanctions and spite. This case is possible due to the fact that the leaders are being elected from amid the professors that in few cases have an administration degree knowing therefore little specialized legislation and paper work related issues. Therefore the non-academic administration being trained professionals that can contradict or criticize the actions of an academic if this has operated or operates in the field of expertise of the administrator and outside his own.

4. Conclusions

It can be easily observed that the concept of *free speech* can be identified in every sector of the university. The predominant users of the *free speech* are the academics, because they represent the moral, rightful persons that are in possession of the truth and which have the ability and the opportunity to pass it on to others. Within the academic community, the professors are not the only category of actors, students and administrative staff also can be users of the *free speech* but in a less extent.

As it can be seen in Figure 1 the entire academic community may be contained in the ancient concept of "parrhesia", because the *free speech* can appear

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 164.

¹¹ In which the *free speech* is used.

¹² Non-professional is not used with a pejorative sense, meaning in this case *not related to the academic work or environment*.

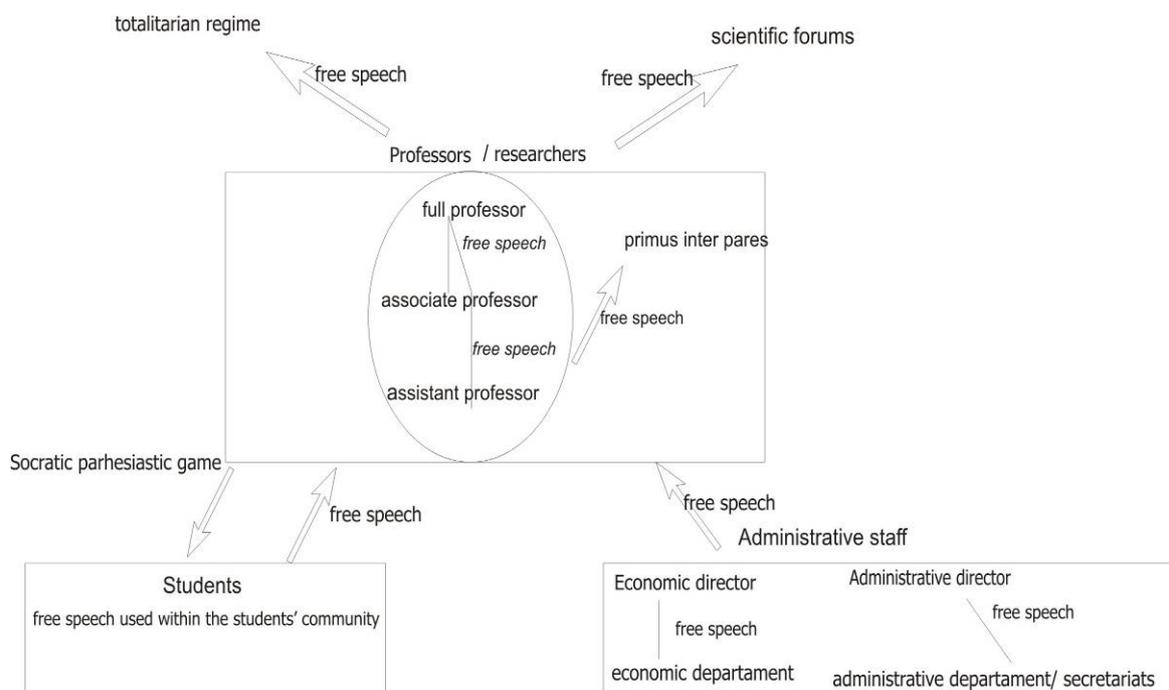


Fig. 1. The occurrences of the *free speech* within the academic environment.

in every situation where the speaker is on an inferior position with respect to the interlocutor. The free speech always “comes from below and is directed towards above” (see Fig. 1, the only exception being the Socratic parrhesiastic game).

Because the genuine truth teller can be defined by the consistency and stability of opinions, choices and ideas, within the university the professors/researcher should be uncorrupted when it comes to the truth in both their main attributions, that of finding the truth and that of teaching it to others. In modern times when the university is becoming more and more opened to society and it’s restrictions it is harder to identify the real truth tellers, the true professors that are not caught between political and social options and their main interest remains the research and the discovering of the truth.

For sure the academia is not the only place the *free speech* occurs but as we have already shown we have reasons to consider it most suitable for an analysis that will be the starting point for future research on the matter.

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