

Interview with Johannes Angermüller



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How has the notion of crisis entered discourses about higher education and research?

We certainly can cite many examples of crises in higher education and research now and in the past. It much depends on where you look and when. Before becoming a professor of discourse in the UK, I was a professor of sociology of higher education in Germany and I obtained my PhD in France. I remember the deep and prolonged economic crisis afflicting Germany from 1992 to around 2005. There were quite significant salary cuts around 2000 in German universities and now salaries (of professors) seem to be rising whereas British universities saw major spending cuts in the mid-1980s under Thatcher, then a relative growth of university salaries and now the fat years are over again. In France, the number of fulltime researchers has been growing steadily whereas salaries have been in a slow but

consistent decline for about 30 years. However, we should be cautious with official statistics which can hide certain developments like the deterioration of junior academic jobs in Germany, where a very large proportion of academic staff work on precarious 50% contracts or less. At Mainz, where I was before going to the UK, a whopping 94% of academic staff are on temporary contracts, about 50% of them for one year or less. This is of course not in any way productive for anybody. But what I want to emphasise is that there is no uniform development: different fields in different countries are affected in quite different ways.

Crises usually appear as a reaction to a perceived mismatch between objective possibilities and subjective expectations. In higher education, we have seen many such critical periods. Thus, the student revolts of the 1960s took place against the background of an unprecedented increase of student numbers as well as of academic positions, especially in the social sciences and humanities, which was a big challenge for local academic hierarchies. Today, a similar development can be witnessed in China even though I don't know to what degree similar critical potentials have been forming. Most higher education systems have continued to expand since the peak of the enormous growth rates in the early 1970s. Some systems like Spain and Portugal saw some dynamic growth in the 1980s and 1990s. If governments cut spending for higher education (e.g. in Great Britain under Thatcher and again today), private institutions have continued to grow in certain countries (e.g. in some Eastern European countries). Therefore, if we take a global perspective as John Meyer does, there has been a more or less uninterrupted expansion of the higher education system since the 19th century.

Yet there is a widespread feeling that higher education is in crisis again today, which may have been spurred by a number of developments:

1. An economic crisis: as governments slash funding for students, tuition fees to pay for mass education have been soaring, especially in universities of the Anglo-American world, where higher education is increasingly becoming a profit-oriented business. In Germany, by contrast, it now turns out that the attempt to establish tuition fees has failed and all German states are returning to free higher education. Yet at the same time, never have there been more German students having to do casual jobs during their studies. Therefore, as Bourdieu reminds us, if higher education has always been a means for the upper and middle class to dominate the lower classes, this domination has become especially pervasive today. In many professions, you can no longer choose between higher education or vocational training. Higher education has almost become a universal standard while access to higher education is far from universal.
2. A political crisis: The economic crisis is tightly connected with a political crisis especially the one we can currently see in Europe. If not every country is entitled to a strong higher education system, the question of who has a voice in educational policy-making and who does not can be raised. In the EU, the top institutions in higher education are all in rich countries. This is not only the fault of the current German neo-liberal hegemony in the EU, which forces "uncompetitive countries" to reduce state services such as higher education system (see e.g. the

EuroMemorandum 2012. European integration at the crossroads: Democratic deepening for stability, solidarity and social justice, produced by the EuroMemo Group, based in Germany), but also an effect of new technologies of academic governance which aim at creating a global market of higher education by means of rankings and comparisons on a global scale. As a consequence, academic prestige and power is concentrated in very few places (Harvard, Oxford, etc.). I certainly don't want to speak out for a return to national parochialism but we need to address questions of democracy if the top tier of higher education is monopolised by a few elite institutions in a few countries.

3. A disciplinary crisis: We can mention another crisis, which testifies to the shifting prestige, legitimacy and popularity among the disciplines. While research in some disciplines is seen as providing solutions to pressing social problems (e.g. economics until the 2008-9 financial crisis), others have experienced a legitimisation crisis (e.g. letters since the 1970s). Some disciplines (e.g. engineering) fail to attract large student numbers despite the significant political support given to them. The crisis of these disciplines is due to the changing political climate outside (e.g. letters failing to be socially useful, economics failing to solve the financial crisis, engineering perceived as masculinist and "boring" for female and many male students). New fashionable funding schemes have deepened these crises. We can think of fields like biotechnology, information science, nanotechnology, and climate research, which have seen massive funding for a few years until the big money goes elsewhere to fund the current fad.

How has it been used to construct problems and offer putative solutions in the discourses of politicians, research institutions, universities and the European Union regarding social sciences and the humanities?

What comes to my mind of course is the idea, dear to a few policy makers (especially in the Anglo-American world), that the best solution to the current problems is to privatise and commercialise higher education. Thus, the crisis discourse has helped to legitimate certain new approaches to higher education, notably entrepreneurial models of academic governance. Even though entrepreneurialism doesn't have to go hand in hand with cuts in funding, it has deeply changed the way academic institutions work. To get funding from national and European organisations, for instance, you increasingly need to prove your impact outside the academic sphere. This is not necessarily a bad thing but it can be prohibitive for certain types of research and fields. Moreover, decision-making in academic organisations is generally less democratic than it used to be. At the same time, junior researchers have become much more visible on the academic scene in Europe. But let's be very clear about two points:

1. You can't raise the quality of education by turning students into fee-paying customers. On the contrary, to get the best possible students and results, you need to pay them. This is especially clear with PhD students. There are many opportunities for getting funding for one's PhD, especially in the more prosperous countries of the West. That's a major reason for why these countries were able to monopolise the

global market of the best and brightest for a long time. Yet if you make them pay, you attract those for whom academic diplomas need to have pay off sometime. In the long run, this kills higher education since it needs people who do teaching and research for its own sake.

2. You can't raise the quality of research by making it a profit-oriented business. Research needs open exchange and free circulation of ideas. Research needs an academic commons.

You can't produce scientific ideas without exposing them to the critical attention of the whole community. Yet if research is subjected to the logic of a private business, it will cease to be scientific. Unfortunately, there is no public debate about the huge amounts of research money companies and other private organisations receive from governments in the West. Governments give more research money out to the private sector than to universities. Yet "private research" does usually not feed into any debate among researchers and is therefore more difficult to account for than public research, which receives the critical attention of the scientific communities. We wouldn't have any shortages in research funding if research money was used for research and not for subsidising profit-oriented businesses.

How is the role of the state in research and education being revised and with what implications? How is the scope of freedom and creative potential of researchers being affected in a context where markets seem to rule?

The question is what one means by saying that the state is on the retreat. Some people seem to claim that by turning to the "market" governments can spend less on higher education and research. It is hoped (especially among right-wing policy-makers) that by evoking the market they can mobilise funding from the private sector. However, it would be delusional to think that profit-oriented businesses would fund higher education and research. It is a fact that the private sector does not and will never fund teaching in any significant manner and businesses usually only fund research that is immediately relevant for their profit-making objectives (which I mostly have difficulty calling research because it's mostly about product development). Private donations are generally negligible even in the U.S. with its long tradition of giving out significant amounts of private money for strictly delimited purposes. Donation for non-profit organisation make up less than 0.3% of GDP in the U.S. and probably no more than 0.1% or 0.2% in most European countries. The phenomenon of sponsored education by private actors is usually much overestimated (not least because receivers have to publicise the donations they attract) even though it can make a big difference in certain small areas. But there is no just way you would run a whole educational system on money from private businesses (even in the U.S., which is rather exceptional in its decentralised and hybrid structure, I would guess that more than 80% of funding for teaching and *basic* research comes from government, most of it course through indirect channels like tax breaks, as well as from the students and their families).

There is just no evidence that you can really take away government funding from higher education without increasing tuition fees and thus squeezing more and more people from higher education (which few governments can really afford). The market in this first

sense just won't work. However, the market has been frequently evoked in a second sense as an entrepreneurial form of academic governance in a sector that continues to be funded by the state but in more "flexible" and "competitive" ways. In this second sense, the market has become a reality in many areas of higher education, especially in many European countries where universities may now be becoming even more entrepreneurial than in the U.S.

However, let's not forget that markets in this sense are deeply embedded in a set of governmental practices. And as theories of governmentality and of regulation have pointed out time and again, markets are not a given. They are created by means of governmental practices in order to control what people do and think, even though in camouflaged, indirect ways, from a distance. In fact, just like states markets are devices that coordinate people and they do not have to lead to different results. What can make markets dangerous is that they can make people do something they wouldn't do for the state. For the sake of economic success, certain British universities are about to admit large groups of former soldiers from civil war-ridden countries. Would they do that if a minister told them to do so?

Higher education has, as Burton Clark points out, always been subjected to the more rigid governmental practices of the (nation-) state and the more indirect governmental practices of the market. The last few years have seen the fashion of the Entrepreneurial University in many European countries, which is based on the idea – a bit naïve I would think – that universities should be liberated from the tutelage of centralised power. This shift towards the market pole may come with less centralised power, but it most certainly comes with more decentralised power, which is testified by the many new controlling, evaluation, audit schemes that keep us busy every day. It's difficult to imagine an academic system with no power at all. Yet power can be more or less productive. I would prefer a system where there is not only one power logic. It's good to have power logics in competition, to see their contradictions and their contingency. Power is not bad as long as we don't have to take it too seriously.

Who drives research policies? The Portuguese Science and Technology Foundation cites Germany as a model and claims that the way it can help the Portuguese scientific community be successful in European calls is by promoting a "greater alignment with the European programmes". To what extent are core countries setting standards, research areas and priorities, and how can that impact on social sciences and humanities, which are context-specific?

I'm not sure what's the part of institutional fantasy in citing the German model but as I said in the beginning we should be very careful not to buy into the myth of the "German model". In the EU, the "success" of Germany is based on a double exploitation. German capitalists have gained a considerable competitive edge over other European economies by slashing the salaries of German workers since the Euro came into being and greatly increasing the number of precarious contracts, and German universities are no exception to this development. Since the outbreak of the Euro crisis, the German government forces this regime on other Euro countries, in the South and France, who have to reduce their investments in higher education and sacrifice a whole generation in the name of competitiveness and productivity. I therefore don't think the crisis can be solved by copying the "German" way

of running the economy or higher education. It's like chasing each other to attain ever lower economic but also civilizational levels.

But you don't need to share such a diagnosis and most Germans certainly don't. Of course there's a German model in academic governance, which is the professor as the head of an autonomous intellectual-administrative unit, i.e. a holder of a chair with a team of research assistants, administrative staff, personal students etc. This is a rather unique system in that professors reunite both intellectual and organisational leadership and they are more or less the only status category to enjoy life-time jobs. In the U.S., the UK and most of the Latin countries (with the exception of Italy and Switzerland) departments are usually not organised around chairs and they are more like integrated organisations with a larger permanent workforce.

Now, the German model has two somewhat contradictory effects on the careers of junior academics: on the one hand, they need to build up their own autonomous project and team over time; on the other hand, they have to stay on precarious contracts as dependent assistants of a full professor until late in their academic careers. I don't want to bash this system, which I enjoyed in many respects (I especially liked the long time I could take to develop my own authentic research orientations). It has therefore been successful in producing many excellent researchers many of whom are pursuing academic careers all around Europe. The problem is that junior researchers are held in precarious situations for too long (usually until the age of 45, when some obtain a chair and others drop out), which is why German policy-makers have come up with all kinds of ideas to make academic careers more predictable. I would be in favour of the French, Spanish and UK model, where academics can get tenure right after their PhD. Austria, too, has now implemented a system which allows to create tenure-track positions like in the U.S.

For the time being, German policy-makers have been experimenting with special junior elite programmes that help junior researchers to develop their own projects early on in their careers. I may be wrong but I guess that the young researcher groups that have proliferated all over Europe are modelled after the DFG Emmy-Noether young researcher groups which began in the mid-1990s. These prestigious awards (usually around million euros) allow a small elite of junior researchers to lead a team of doctoral students over five to six years. I don't know whether these new programmes have made junior academic careers less precarious but they have certainly created the incentive for young researchers to become more mobile and "entrepreneurial".

Another example of what really may be considered as a German model at the European scale is the way the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (DFG) works. Like the research councils in the UK, DFG is the main research-funding organisation in Germany with a multi-billion research budget every year and the money is mostly distributed competitively and in a rather transparent and professional way. It is academics, not politicians or administrators, who evaluate each other in a peer system of specialised panels that decide on how to distribute the money in the respective fields. This is an institutional model that until recently had been unknown in many other countries, especially in Eastern Europe and the Latin world, where

research money was channelled through the ministries, whose scientific expertise in evaluating proposals is limited. Both the European Research Council and the recently founded French *Agence Nationale de la Recherche* (ANR) seems to have been modelled after DFG.

In Portugal there is a widespread institutional pressure towards excellence, translated into the internationalization of research, strong competition and publication in journals with known impact factor. In Portugal, for the social sciences and humanities fields, this means following core countries – Anglo-Saxon ones – and core languages – basically English – and applying for European funding. Is that the case Germany, France, the UK and other countries? What are the implications of these priorities for the work of researchers and for the diversity/quality of research?

It really depends on the disciplinary field and the country. Some fields such as economics and the natural sciences are organised around a peer review system of English-speaking flagship journals. As long as these journals, indicators and rankings play a real role in their everyday academic practice, they are meaningful signals of academic excellence in the community. Yet many fields are organised like that and it makes little sense to rely on external artificial indicators whose importance we shouldn't overestimate. Also, there is not one recipe that can be applied to all situations. It may be more important to have a strong record of journal publications if you want to apply for research funding; for a professorship, by contrast, books may be more important. At any rate, the importance of English publications is probably growing at least for those who want to go for European research money. But for the great majority of academics in Europe it doesn't make sense to publish in English and certainly not in English *only* if they want to establish themselves in communities whose vernacular is not English.

In our DISCONEX project at Warwick in the UK and Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris ("The Discursive Construction of Academic Excellence" funded by the European Research Council 2013-2018), which compares various fields in the Social Sciences and Humanities in the U.S., Germany and France, we investigate the ways in which researchers succeed in the academic business. We have just started with the project but what I can already say is that the importance of standard ISI (Institute of Scientific Information, presently Thomson-Reuter's Web of Science) and Google Scholar indicators circulating out there is wildly overestimated. It is true that there is an increasing offer of numeric representations of research quality and especially younger researchers may believe they are monitored by these figures but I don't see any evidence that these indicators have become any more relevant in decision-making situations such as third-party funding decisions or job recruitments. In no way is decision-making an automatic process that can be based on one single standard, quantitative or not. On the contrary, decision-makers always have to reconcile many different criteria, expectations and practices, and quantitative indicators may contribute to "objectifying" or reinforcing certain aspects of an application but there are many other aspects that just cannot be quantified.

Generally speaking, we have found that the excellence of academic researchers is based on the personal or virtual ties, on the many formal and informal relationships

they create with other people in their communities during their careers. If the challenge for researchers is to exist for other researchers, they need to use oral and written texts and engage in positioning work at different levels at once: they need to act as immediate colleagues in the local hierarchies of a department or university but also as peers in national networks and milieus, and last but not least they also need to relate to the canonical references in global disciplinary fields and communities. As a rule, researchers consider those researchers as “successful” who can occupy a position in this multileveled space and who navigate in all these local, national and global levels at the same time. Of course the most existential question for them is where they can be recruited for permanent positions and we shouldn’t forget the importance of local and national levels for academic recruitment. Even institutions that pride themselves on their international research stars (Harvard, Oxford, ETH Zurich...) recruit the large majority of their staff from their respective academic system. The academic business is really not so much about h-indices and “high impact” journals, which make some people forget about the many *different* competencies researchers need to have in order to fill a position. It is more important to make sure that you end up with a *balanced* profile that will make sense for the specific place and its environment where you will end up someday. Departments don’t recruit h-indices and you won’t really succeed in the academic business anywhere if you place a few articles in U.S. flagship journals without relating to your local or national colleagues.

What examples of resistance to the crisis discourse can you point out? How can alternative forms of governance in education and research be imagined and enacted?

I think the first thing everybody can and should do is to sign up for one’s union. They are there to help in case of problems and if you don’t have a problem you can still help them with your monthly fee to help others.

Another thing I see among younger researchers is that they tend to be better organised today and communicate more among themselves. They are the most vulnerable ones in the system and they need to have a voice. Most disciplinary associations are now open to student members who start to organise their own conferences and networks. There are grass-roots initiatives like the hugely successful campaign *Templiner Manifest* by the German Union for Education Workers (GEW) or the 2011 Summer Factory on education by the Institute of Solidary Modernity (ISM) in Germany, the grass-roots initiative HackYourPhd in France or the Blockupy events in the defence of the Public University in the UK. All of that seems to testify to the increased attention higher education enjoys nowadays as a pressing political issue of our time.

Generally speaking, I think it is a big problem that even though the money spent on higher education in Europe is probably still growing, more and more money is put into precarious third-party funding and not into the creation of good permanent jobs, especially in Germany, which in this respect can be much less of a model than the Spanish and French systems. The question of how to recruit is certainly a crucial but also a hard one. In some countries (e.g. in the early 1980s in Italy and, to some degree, in France), a whole cohort of junior staff was suddenly given tenure, which then blocked the system for a whole

generation. Austria has now shown how to increase the number of fulltime, permanent staff slowly but steadily. But I think we really need to observe other systems more and compare what works and what doesn't.

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