

The Chairman's Concluding Address
Saturday, March 5, 2016

Good afternoon, my name is Asger Sørensen, and I presently serve as Chairman of The Danish Philosophical Association. As has become customary at the annual meetings, it is the privilege of the Chairman to say a few words to wrap up the proceedings, and this year, for the first time, this privilege falls to me. I thus will be the one taking upon myself the risk of addressing this crowd of demanding philosophers, who are intellectually sated after two concentrated days of challenging and engaged discussions, but who now also are worn out and tired, eager simply to leave the premises. I will therefore try not to keep you for too long.

Still, some things have to be said on an occasion such as this.

Let me first congratulate the hosts and organizers, our colleagues here at the University of Copenhagen - Finn Collin, Søren Gosvig Olesen and Klemens Kappel - for having prepared this meeting so carefully during the last year and for having carried it out both efficiently and generously during these two days. Let's give them a hand!

Thanks also to the Department of Media, Cognition and Communication and to the research project led by Klemens Kappel for their generous financial support of this event.

This being said, I am sure it has escaped the attention of very few – if any – that this meeting takes place during a huge crisis at the University of Copenhagen that has affected the Philosophy section very negatively: Two of our most esteemed colleagues, Finn Collin and Poul Lübcke, have been selected for dismissal.

From my point of view this case concerns both philosophy and politics, just as it concerns me deeply personally.

1. Let me dispense with the personal first, trying not to be overcome by emotion.

These two philosophers were already by far my seniors when I enrolled as a student at the University of Copenhagen in 1980, and already back then I had the privilege of learning from their philosophical generosity and wit. This was, of course, the case in relation to various philosophical issues, about which I have consulted their numerous writings from time to time, just as we have had all kinds of conversations and discussions over the years. Also important, however, are the genuine academic attitudes and virtues they both incarnate and have transmitted to their surroundings, and from which I and many others have benefitted in our formation as researchers, educators and scholars committed to the university. On this special occasion, I – and I am sure that I speak on behalf of many in this case – want to thank them personally for more than three decades of inspiration.

2. Now, skipping further personal details, let me as Chairman of the Association comment politically on the local situation at the University of Copenhagen. I shall subsequently broaden the political perspective, and at the end of this speech, I will finally add a philosophical argument concerning the current situation.

On behalf of the Danish Philosophical Association I must, as the Chairman, say to the University of Copenhagen that by taking away the institutional support for these two professional philosophers, it deals a serious blow to the Association's efforts to consolidate the status of philosophy in Denmark, which is the purpose of the Association. This consolidation is highly dependent on the public

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understanding the necessity of philosophy and philosophizing, and by dismissing such prominent philosophers the university shows very little respect for the discipline.

This is due to the fact that precisely Poul and Finn are distinguished by having played a remarkable role in relation to the Danish public over the years. Apart from major contributions to the international scientific circles of likeminded philosophers, these two philosophers have had a long track record, each in his own way, of reaching out to broader audiences. These audiences include students of philosophy, scientists and academics from other disciplines, and the Danish intellectual public at large. Long before it became required by law and the contracts regulating the relations between state and university, these two philosophers were engaged in pioneer dissemination of academic philosophy.

Let me be unfair, and only mention one single publication, edited by Poul Lübcke: *Politikens Filosofi Leksikon*, the best philosophy dictionary ever published in Denmark, and therefore also translated into languages such as German, Swedish and Norwegian. It has been the indispensable companion for Danes seriously interested in philosophy since 1983, with a second enlarged edition published in 2010.

As regards the Danish Philosophical Association, Finn is one of the leading figures within this Association. Finn was co-founder and for many years – after Hans Fink – chairman. He has for many years served as the editor of the *Danish Yearbook of Philosophy*. Hence, he has for decades been active in establishing the tradition of philosophical solidarity across schools and institutions that we enjoy on occasions such as the annual meetings of the Association, and for this the Association yesterday awarded him a lifelong honorary membership at this year's general assembly.

Poul and Finn have for years, as internationally recognized researchers, scholars and educators, demonstrated to the public how to handle philosophical questions in a sober and proper academic way. It is therefore nothing less than a disgrace that the University of Copenhagen has allowed the economic crisis to result in the dismissal of two such capacities.

3. Now, let me now broaden out the political perspective.

The cases of announced dismissals of Poul and Finn are unfortunately two among all too many. We know that 532 positions are destined to disappear at the University of Copenhagen and that this is the culmination – thus far! – of a long series of cuts and dismissals at all the Danish universities in the last decade. It has made us all realize the hard way the fact that rector of the Copenhagen Business School had to admit to the foreign faculty in 2014, as the wave of dismissals hit CBS; in Denmark there is no tenure in the American sense. We are salaried workers like everybody else.

This has consequences for both the humanities and the sciences.

Since we as university academics typically are very specialized, we have on the one hand a substantial impact on our field of specialization – if we are fortunate and things turn out well – but on the other hand, we are also fragile and vulnerable, especially at the labor market, but often also as persons. Specializing in this way is sign of a trust in the future of research and education, and one could say that the university in this situation has betrayed that trust. Confronted with the development at the universities these past years, we are therefore frankly terrified, both about our present and about our future. It has been documented several times in surveys that today at Danish

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universities, employees are afraid of criticizing strong societal power centers, including their own management.

At my own university, Aarhus University, during the winter 2013-14 a minor problem with the budget - less than 2 % - was revealed. This deficit, however, was doubled because of a strategic decision by the rector and the board. After having demonstrated that they were incapable of handling the university's economy, university management claimed the right to reserve further funds to be used for strategic purposes - at their own discretion. Pleas for salary cuts as a show of solidarity were turned down. The result: 388 positions were cut.

The current situation at the University of Copenhagen is, however, different. Here, apparently, the deficit is due to government decisions beyond the control of the university. The decision about how to handle the deficit - and thus who to dismiss – has taken a special twist, however, one even more radical than in Aarhus. In the Copenhagen case, apparently the university management - at least in the humanities, lets each department deal with the economic problem by themselves. At the humanities faculty, only 29 people had to leave, but because of the procedure that was chosen, the university ended up dismissing at least one distinguished professor, a member of the Royal Danish Society of Science.

4. But why should it matter? A lot of other people get fired every day; why should a university professor be an exception?

Well, to answer why this should actually be the case, we get to the final philosophical argument.

The Professor is not just a person with a job. It is an idea, an institution to which there is attached a special symbolic value. This is the case both in relation to research, education, culture and society at large.

In relation to research and education, the professor is the top of the knowledge hierarchy within a field. If we accept that here might somehow be truth to be known within a field, then the professor is supposed to be the one closest to ascertaining what it might be. The truth within an area of academic inquiry is not handed to us by divine revelation, a government ministry or any other institution. Scientific inquiry has to rely, on itself and both in relation to itself and to its surroundings, it is important that *one can distinguish between who to trust and who not to trust*. Within a discipline, the professor is the one to be trusted.

Scientific and scholarly inquiry is not democratic, but meritocratic. It is not that each individual researcher casts one vote in some sort of election; it is the validity of each argument and the sum of knowledge that counts. The whole idea of the Professor is that knowledge accumulated through scientific experience as wisdom becomes an indispensable resource for science, for culture and thus for society.

This kind of knowledge cannot be replaced by the bits and pieces of knowledge possessed by young scientists, even if they are of a greater number. It is the same logic that creates the distinction between the role of the teacher and that of the pupil. The teacher is supposed to know more than what is communicated during class. Science and humanities are, both within each discipline and as a whole, very complex systems of knowledge and social institutions, and the accumulated experience

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of a distinguished professor is intended to synthesize the complexities into both intellectual and moral virtues.

This is, of course, not always the case, but the legitimacy of science and the university *per se* rely on the legitimacy of such ideas. The idea of the university as a meritocratic institution is based on the putative legitimacy of institutional power, if it is based on knowledge. This is the logic that gives legitimacy to the hierarchy of the degrees, the hierarchy of titles conveyed and the hierarchy of positions at an academic institution. This is the foundational idea of knowledge and truth that is the reason why we have a university at all.

By treating senior scientists and highly distinguished professors as just ordinary employees, who may be dismissed with reference to economy and without any other special reason, the University of Copenhagen treats all of its employees as salaried workers producing units - which for us amounts to producing peer-reviewed publications and students who pass their exams and get their degrees. This focus on production and economics, however, is undermining not only the internal knowledge hierarchy of science and academic inquiry, but also the societal legitimacy of the university as an academic and scientific institution. The point is: If the university itself does not acknowledge that some may know better than others, why should society acknowledge that the university and the humanities and sciences may know better?

Apart from this role in science, the Professor has a special intellectual role to play in relation to culture and society. As Jürgen Habermas has emphasized with reference to the American sociologist, Talcott Parsons, the Professor is both supposed to contribute to the enlightenment of a democratic society and to reflect publicly on the role of science and research in relation to such a society, as well as the role of science and research in relation to the arts as well as the spheres of moral and cultural value.¹ Society is more than economy.

One could have hoped that the logic of such ideals was respected by real-world scientific institutions, but apparently this is not the case. One could also have hoped that venerable ideals of the Humboldt or Newmann traditions, of the functionalist CUDOS norms, or the just ideals of the US' postwar research policy, were involved in the today's decision making, but apparently this is not the case either.

Let me remind you that according to Danish law a university board is only *required* to admit *one* academic, and that the majority *must* be non-academics. University boards in Denmark thus reflect a fundamental distrust in the universities. . .and why is that? Well, to indicate why this might be so, let me quote a little of what Marx & Engels said about capitalism in the *Communist Manifesto* from 1848 – and now I am approaching the end of the speech.

In this manifesto it is emphasized that the “bourgeoisie, historically, has played a most revolutionary part”, devaluing every occupation “honoured and looked up to with reverent awe.”² As a consequence,

¹ See Jürgen Habermas, "Der Idee Der Universität – Lernprozesse," *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik* 32, no. 5 (1986).

² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *Marx/Engels Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969; reprint, Marx/Engels Internet Archive (marxists.org) 1987, 2000). Chapter I. Bourgeois and Proletarians.

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“the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science” – that is, the professor – are converted into merely “paid wage labourers.” And again: “Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify.”³

And now the classical quote: “All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.”⁴

As I understand it, nowadays Marx is not so often quoted by philosophers lecturing here at the University of Copenhagen. As a voice from the past, however, I must admit that I find this analysis right to the point. This is how powerful philosophical thought can be, this is how clear the logic of societal development can be reconstructed. This is philosophy – in this case social or political philosophy – when it is best.

Whatever awe society might have had in relation to science, the university or the professor as venerable institutions – globalized capitalism simply reduces everything to either forces of production, mere products, or both. This is what we have to face with our “sober senses” today.

Still, the force of critical reasoning must not be forgotten. This is what we as philosophers are committed to, and history shows that sometimes this actually – in periods – might have an effect. The Danish Philosophical Association is committed to the development of philosophy, and this is needed today more than ever.

On behalf of the Association, let me wish you all farewell. I hope to see you next year in Emdrup at the Danish School of Education, during the first weekend in March – and please remember to pay your membership dues!⁵

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Thanks to Carsten Friberg, Cynthia Grund, Daniel Gamper, Esther Oluffa Pedersen and Per Jepsen for comments, critique and corrections.