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2018

### Authoritarians don't like higher ed

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# Authoritarians don't like higher ed

History is always a good source to help us understand today's problems and tomorrow's challenges. In the last few years we have been witnessing mounting attacks on higher education. Detractors contest its value, accuse it of brainwashing people, and call it a waste of taxpayers' money. And all this is taking place in an environment in which facts are distorted, people seem less educated about reality, and ideological leanings are more important than critical thinking. In other words, a world that seems to be moving more and more towards mediocrity and authoritarianism. Are there historical precedents to what we are witnessing today?

One such event took place in Spain on October 12, 1936. Although there are no direct records, the most popular account of the incident is as follows. Shortly after the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, the rector (president) of the University of Salamanca, the celebrated writer and philosopher Miguel de Unamuno, gave a speech during the opening ceremonies for the academic year. In it he mentioned José Rizal, an intellectual and hero of the independence of the Philippine islands, which until 1898 had been a Spanish colony.

## Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

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At the presiding table of the ceremony was general José Millán Astray, a veteran of the Philippine war and a strong ally of the Spanish right-wing dictator Francisco Franco whose wife, Carmen Polo, was attending the ceremony. After hearing Unamuno praising Rizal, Millán Astray shouted "Death to intelligence! Long live death!" to which Unamuno reportedly responded, "This is the temple of the intelligence and I am its high priest. You are desecrating this sacred precinct. You will win because you have brute force, but you will not convince. To convince you must persuade, and to persuade you would need something that you lack: reason and righteousness in the struggle."

Unamuno, a conservative, was fired the next day as the university president, received numerous threats, and died on December of that year while under house arrest.

Fast forward to April of this year. Several days after Viktor Orbán was elected for a third

consecutive term (and fourth overall) as Hungarian prime minister with a landslide victory for his conservative party, the pro-government newspaper *Figyelő* published a list of more than 200 "mercenaries" (essentially a black list) that included human rights advocates, journalists, and 30 faculty members from the Budapest-based Central European University (CEU), including Diána Úrge-Vorsatz, an environmental physicist and member of Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change when it won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007.

The Hungarian government, which has increasingly shown nationalistic and authoritarian tendencies, has signaled its discomfort towards CEU through legislation and by financing other activities that could be described as pseudoscience or charlatany. The CEU has been funded by Hungarian-American millionaire George Soros who is seen as an enemy of the authoritarian government, and now that university is planning to

move to Vienna.

Since authoritarian and nationalistic tendencies are becoming commonplace in the U.S. and many other countries, one wonders what higher education leaders can do in order to fence off these threats. And I think the Unamuno example represents a good guide to follow.

For many years leaders of higher education in this country have shown either cowardice, or lack the imagination to fight to preserve the mission of higher education – one that provides freedom to pursue intellectual activities without fear from retribution, one that exemplifies the way for social justice, and serves as the light that illuminates the path for society to follow.

How many of today's higher education leaders see themselves as the high priests of intellectuality? Not many if you judge by their agendas. Most of them just try to deal with the system by keeping low profiles and trying to weather whatever storms come their way. Others feel comfortable by surrounding themselves with mediocre "yes men" (or "yes women"), while spending time attending football games or social events. In other words, they see their goal as keeping a job, not as pursu-

ing a mission.

What happens is that most of them do not realize that beyond financial and policy issues, the major threat to higher education in this country comes from those whose ultimate goal is to transform our society into a model for their ideology, one that seeks uniformity over diversity, status quo over innovation, and conformity over audacity. Failing to recognize and act upon these threats may actually help them keep their jobs, but it certainly doesn't fulfill their responsibilities to society.

So, next time you hear politically oriented criticism aimed at higher education, there are two things you need to watch for: How are the college and university leaders responding, and how much of a menace those attacks represent to our democratic institutions?

The Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky once said, "The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons." Maybe it is time to ask the same question about our colleges and universities.

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