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🦋 Democracy in academia: the not-so-wanted child



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Of all domains of inquiry, the science of democracy is hit particularly heavily in non-democratic regimes. **Max Steuer** argues that non-democratic practices in academia complicate the issue. Here, he calls for a debate on more intra-academic democracy

In the mid-2020s, few would argue that it is possible to practice social science equally well in illiberal or outright authoritarian regimes. Indeed, in such regimes there is no certainty that scholars can search for truth if what they find might be inconvenient for — or even damaging to — the ruling power.

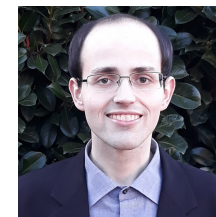
Excellent social scientific research results might emerge in such contexts. Typically, however, they would focus on themes that feed the rulers' narratives or, at least, are not inconvenient for them. The **science of democracy** is at the centre of this maelstrom. For instance, theoretical arguments on the need for 'managed democracy' or the prioritisation of the collective over individual rights, when reduced to their crude form, can be extremely useful for justifying centralised control, including over academic institutions.

Arguments for a democratic academia or scholarship of/on democracy, on the other hand, could threaten authoritarianism. In some places, academic institutions enjoy high social standing and material wealth. This makes them influential challengers to attempts at power concentration. Scientific clarity can bedevil autocratic pronouncements.

A view from Central European academia

Central European academia knows what non-democratic regime conditions mean for democracy's science. Their awareness has been formed by (at least) four decades of authoritarian rule by state socialist dictatorships. Given the recent spread of technological innovations and improvements in surveillance measures and propaganda, **twentieth-century experiences remain formative.**

Of course, repressive regimes affect other disciplines, too. But those studying democracy **feel their effects particularly strongly** because questions of political (party) leadership, regime



Max Steuer

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Max's research focuses on the science of democracy beyond disciplines, comparative constitutional adjudication (with emphasis on constitutional courts), and constitutionalism in the European Union.

His work has appeared in journals including the *European Constitutional Law Review*, *European Journal of Futures Research* and *The International Journal of Human Rights*.

political science and dissidents challenging the authoritarian regime. For example, the oldest political science department in Slovakia was founded by human rights activist Miroslav Kusý.

For researchers studying democracy, questions of party leadership, regime durability and civil society organisation are impossible to escape. Under autocratic administrations, this may attract the regime's ire

Kusý was one of the few signatories of **Charter 77**, an appeal to the Czechoslovak human rights regime to honour its international human rights commitments.

Concepts with meanings of their own

Working in academia in what used to be the 'Second World' raises additional challenges. For example, depending on where you live and work, the concept of '**tenure**' may not mean the same thing for the stability and standards of permanent positions. There are also significant divergences in academic protections around what tenured staff may, or may not, study and teach.

Titles can be misleading, too, where committees of primarily local, or at best regional, scholarly reach are driving promotional processes. If, in such committees, the decision makers opposing the strengthening of global credentials at the expense of, say, a large quantity of publications in the local language, enjoy a majority, global credentials can even be counterproductive.

Furthermore, in societies without a high degree of constitutional literacy, **academic institutions are likelier to be 'captured'**. Fragile democratic regimes have limited endogenous cultures of resistance. Scholars would be wise to direct their enquiries into how this threat for universities materialises.

Size, language and democracy within

Academic communities in small 'Second World' countries also face greater threats of isolation. So do those who speak languages that scholars beyond a state's borders typically have not

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Regardless of the size of community, however, the uneasy relationship of — not only Central European academia with intra-academic democracy exacerbates fragmentation. We need to be less afraid of democratising academic spaces if they are to enhance the prospects for global (re)democratisation.

 **academia** **democratic theory** **Science of Democracy** **Science of Democracy 2.0**

To enhance the prospects of global democratisation, we must be less afraid of democratising academic spaces

Is academic organisation internally democratic? If that question generates unease, it may be because of entrenched perceptions of democracy representing a **danger to expertise** and the search for truth, regardless of costs. The difficulties of recognising the extent to which democracy needs academia and academia needs democracy might stem from the degree of entrenchment of **minimalist conceptions of democracy**, where sheer majority rule has exhausted ‘democracy’ as a noun.

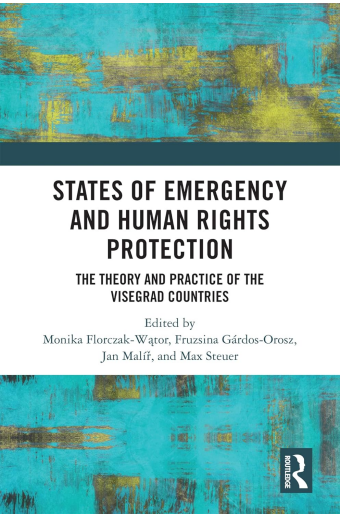
A sheer majority might be driven against truth and expertise. Can more intra-academic democracy facilitate greater alignment between democracy as a political regime on the one hand and truth and expertise on the other?

Building democratic, non-arbitrary academic communities

Consider the prevailing disciplinary organisation of academia, with a hierarchical set of ‘disciplinary journals’. An academic system might penalise scholars publishing ‘outside’ disciplinary journals, even if those journals are highly recognised by academic communities beyond the respective disciplines. If they do, they are expressing directive command much closer to autocratic than democratic practice, because it limits the range of free choices without justification.

Disciplinary silos also narrow the nodes of interaction between individual scholars. Academic communities become smaller and more isolated, misunderstandings about each other’s (ir)relevance emerge that can lead to unnecessary cleavages and ‘talking past each other’.

Resilience Plan for Slovakia as part of Next Generation EU (2024–2026).



States of Emergency and Human Rights Protection: The Theory and Practice of the Visegrad Countries
Routledge, 2024

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Interdisciplinary research centres have emerged in response to the fragmentation of academe – but they remain few

Global trends of interdisciplinarity, manifested by, for example, **research centres** focusing on major contemporary challenges and bringing together scholars with cutting-edge ideas on those challenges regardless of disciplinary backgrounds have emerged as one response to these ills. But they remain few. They rarely emerge at universities with less generous budgets. And they are typically only reachable to scholars who have already firmly established themselves in a discipline.

We do not yet sufficiently understand the impact of this conventional turn to interdisciplinarity only in later career stages – rather than practicing interdisciplinarity at all career stages – for the democracy-conducive effects of academic research.

Rigour and commitment to the highest standards of academic work are essential for democracy in academia. Thinking of them as mutually reinforcing could help understand how the search for truth and commitment to expertise are essential for democracy at large.

No.114 in a Loop thread on the Science of Democracy. Look out for the 🦋 to read more

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