

Symposium

Since 2023's first issue, when *UCR* began the "Symposium" section, we have striven to highlight issues key to scholarly endeavours globally: crossing disciplinary boundaries, academic freedom, threats to research, among other issues. In this issue too, we take forward this interest in scholarly futures, by featuring a speech that focuses on issues that impact the existence of universities as spaces of free thought. We feature here Professor Shalini Randeria's speech at "English Studies: Boundaries, Knowledge, Contestations" (1-2 August 2024), a conference felicitating Professor Neloufer de Mel, former Chair and Senior Professor of English and former Editor of *UCR*, on her retirement. Professor Randeria's keynote speech is featured here because its analysis of contemporary threats to universities is pertinent not only to European universities but to Sri Lankan universities too. We welcome our readers to react and respond to this keynote speech by writing to us at ucr@cmb.ac.lk

Marching to a Different Drum: Reorienting Academic Freedom and Reclaiming Postcolonial perspectives

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I stand before you with a laughing eye and a tearful eye, in the words of the German polymath Goethe. A laughing eye that celebrates Neloufer de Mel's extraordinary academic career, her accomplishments as a scholar of literature along with her work on gender and violence, on theatre and conflict, on democracy and postcolonialism, on nationalism and conflict, to name but a few fields to which she has made invaluable, pathbreaking contributions, both empirical and theoretical. But I also address you with a tearful eye, as this occasion marks Neloufer's formal retirement from the institution to which she devoted decades. It marks the end of her regular teaching here during which she has mentored several generations of students whose lives and work she has shaped just as she has shaped the fields she has worked in, and will certainly continue to influence. It would be impossible to do justice to the breadth of her scholarship, so I have picked with her consent two topics to focus on briefly, namely the responsibilities of universities today, faced by assaults on academic freedom in the age of soft authoritarianism and the importance of reappropriating post-colonial perspectives from right-wing ultranationalists, who are using decolonial and postcolonial rhetoric to advance their putative claims to victimhood.

Let me frame the tasks and responsibilities of universities within a broader reflection on the question of temporality and disruption, wearing my hat as Rector and President of the Central European University in Vienna, the university that has borne the brunt of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban's soft authoritarian rule, where he made it impossible for my university to function and award our US accredited degrees. I have characterized his rule as soft authoritarian because it has slowly, often subtly and systematically, undermined liberal values and institutions from within using the large parliamentary majority he won by gerrymandering the entire country. Like all soft authoritarian rulers, he is using the law and the courts to hollow out the rule of law. My university has paid a very high price for academic freedom by being forced to relocate from Budapest to Vienna following the enactment of lex CEU in 2017. The University won the case it filed against it in the European Court of Justice four years later after it had already re-located. The Orban government reacted by promptly revising the law to make it even sharper. In this context it is important to realize that there is not strong enough protection for academic freedom in European or international law. In its judgement, the Court struck down the Hungarian law by reference to the World Trade Organization's "Trade Related Protection of Services",

namely, the violation of the right of the University to conduct business.

I would like to address three major crises (war, Covid19 and climate change) that face universities in Europe. Each imposes a different temporal perspective and interrupts the smooth flow of homogenous time by introducing radical uncertainty. So, the temporal framing of each of three crises provides a conceptual framework to think about what they mean for universities. Let's look at each of these crises in turn:

1. The Ukraine war brings back to Europe the logic of sovereign violence that was falsely assumed to have been consigned to the past, a logic that was perceived to belong to Europe's history but not to its present or future. This may contrast with the ways in which universities in South Asia have experienced protracted and violent conflicts within their own societies and on their borders.

2. Covid19 alerted us to the power of the present moment to extend uncertainty everywhere and seemingly indefinitely, but also very differently, according to our location; and

3. Climate crisis radically calls into question our assumptions about the future; it challenges the idea that the future will be a mere replication and safe continuation of the present.

Let me briefly take up each crisis in turn and focus on challenges they pose for universities - not so much as institutions - but rather on the ways they invite us to re-think the tasks and responsibilities of academia.

1. War: The war against Ukraine seems to be the most urgent source of uncertainty

in Europe today; it has eclipsed the Covid19 pandemic crisis and climate change. Moreover, its imperatives may contradict those of the other two crises (e.g., the call for increased militarization and military spending in each European country collides with the Green New Deal of the European Union; wars as well as militaries in peace time have by far the largest carbon footprint; and often war/peace cannot be so neatly separated any more in our age of what Mary Kaldor calls "forever wars", wars that never end as they cannot be decisively won). The Russian aggression against Ukraine is the clearest existential threat due to its proximity and the immediacy of a nuclear threat and the presence of Ukraine refugees in all large European cities. On University campuses in Europe and USA the Ukraine war is eclipsed by the current strong wave of protests by students against the horrendous violence against civilians in Gaza. Here questions of perspectivity and positionality are crucial, as feminist theory taught us. So, let's reflect for a moment on who the "us" is and how "we" define it. Seen from outside Europe, it's the Eurocentrism of the selective economy of attention and acknowledgement that is evident when we compare the media attention that wars/civil wars in Yemen, Syria, or Myanmar are failing to receive, to name only a few ongoing ones. If you live in (or flee) Afghanistan, Myanmar or Syria, like

so many students at my university, war has been the defining horizon of everyday reality of your life for many years now. But now, with the economic aftershocks of Russian gas/oil blackmail, war has suddenly disrupted European identity, shattered the European illusion of “Never again a war”, a homogenous time of perpetual peace and prosperity on the European continent. Yet the past returns to haunt our present here. This, then is the first facet of the synchronicity of the nonsynchronous.

This leads to the question of engagement by universities on a more general level: Is it time to bury the Weberian idea of “value neutrality” after a century? Should universities issue political statements? On which wars and against which atrocities, violence and discrimination should university leaders comment in public? (for example, on the Armenia/Azerbaijan border conflict; the bombing of Rohingya villages or Kurdish areas; the Iranian regimes ongoing violence against protesting citizens). Should universities boycott Russian or Israeli institutions? Is the position of the free floating intellectual/academic an idle luxury that we can ill afford in such times of crisis? Should we only comment on events that affect universities anywhere in the world directly? Or should we maintain principled restraint by not commenting on world events but only restrict ourselves to extend our sympathy, support, and hospitality to students/scholars in exile. Nor in the face of these wars and violent conflicts can we simply reaffirm academic freedom and autonomy, though war invites critical reflection on the conditions of possibility of academic freedom too.

The current historic moment also serves as a timely reminder of the fundamental importance of historically informed critical social sciences today, when we are constantly flooded by propaganda and ideologies and disinformation. In Hungary and Poland right-wing governments have set up, and are supporting, universities that indoctrinate but do not educate. Public universities in Hungary have been turned into private foundations with trustees-for-life belonging to the ruling party, FIDESZ. Conservative right-wing forces in Poland established a university with the explicit aim to train illiberal lawyers to counter the liberal law on education imparted by my University. Academic freedom and the autonomy of universities are under threat in Turkish universities where so many colleagues have lost their jobs for signing a petition, while others were jailed. Universities must not shy away from taking an active political stance, by which I mean the pursuit of truth and justice against the grain, the speaking of truth to power, and, if necessary, becoming a counterpower too. All soft authoritarian regimes fear this aspect of universities, their educating critical minds, critical citizens, and not their technical training,

2. Covid19 Crisis: If Covid has taught us a lesson, it is about the truly formidable effect of “space-time compression” in contemporary capitalism: we have been talking incessantly about acceleration, about the way technological quantum leaps have made the world instantly accessible and so on, but interconnectedness

also creates new vulnerabilities, as we suddenly realized. The time of the pandemic was that of the submicroscopic virus that expanded to the scale of the planet at breathtaking speed, making us realize that we all inhabit not just the same moment, but also the same indivisible space. But it affected us very differently depending on our location and within the same geography differentially according to gender, class, age/generation. This is the second facet of the synchronicity of the nonsynchronous.

The pandemic made us reconsider and reevaluate so much of what is taken for granted in the everyday life of universities. But it also encouraged virtual teaching and learning that stood us in good stead. At my University, for example, we designed the Invisible University for Ukraine, where we are offering virtual courses co-convened with Ukrainian colleagues for Ukrainian students in exile and those still in the country. More generally, the pandemic proved the inherent worth of scientific research and of international cooperation. While vaccines could not have been produced so quickly without the involvement of states and private philanthropy, ultimately the rapid breakthroughs were the result of decades of research carried out by hundreds of scientists in laboratories and universities in cooperation around the world. Yet the pandemic also produced the most pronounced attacks on science, amplified through various channels ranging from opportunistic far-right politicians to social media platforms. For a while it seemed that the pandemic would transfer more power to experts. But it also reminded us that experts always come in plurals, and tend to argue vociferously with one another. Also, everyone became overnight their own epidemiologist, demonstrating both the appeal but also the limits, of technocracy.

However, in a broader sense, there are two further important lessons about the role of universities in an age of pandemics. First, Covid19 highlighted a whole series of interconnected inequalities, regimes of discrimination, and differential impacts associated with the ways in which our societies responded to the virus. In short, the pandemic should not be treated merely as a matter of public health and biomedical knowledge. It is also a matter of social justice (or rather, injustice), with a complex, uneven political economy. But above all, we, scholars, must remember the issue of intellectual property that the WTO also protects, i.e., vaccine patents and how a universal pandemic, which affected all of humanity, miserably failed to unite humanity and instead accentuated geo-economic inequalities. Interestingly, European solidarity during the pandemic was built on an important lesson learnt from the 2008 financial crisis: the European Union turned its back on austerity politics and invested enormous sums this time around.

It was a crisis that should have showed us that economists have a lot to learn and little to teach. The pandemic should have led to debt cancellation for the poorest countries as imperative for dealing with the public health crisis after years of imposed structural adjustment and austerity policies by IMF and World Bank; and the vaccine

should not have been patented but instead should have been treated as a global public good. To make it accessible to all, the knowledge from universities on which it was based should have been treated as global commons, instead of being fenced in by patents that ensured enormous profits for a handful of multinational corporations. Academic freedom would mean also the freedom to share our knowledge across all borders as part of a global commons.

Lastly, and this leads us to the third crisis, as critical social scientists, we should also continue our conversation about the origins of the pandemic: pushing ahead with research on how the mass destruction of our natural habitat and the expansion of the logic of limitless extraction can create a world of formidable zoonotic threats from which shareholder value will not save us.

3. Climate Crisis: Pre-2019, fears about “extinction” and climate catastrophe were gathering pace everywhere. Our attention may have been diverted and divided due to the other two crises, but the threat of climate change looms larger than ever. In fact, the very notion of “the future” as a stable and predictable extension of our present will become increasingly impossible to reckon with. The alarming (but far from alarmist!) scenario of climate change forecloses the horizon of the future as a space-time of hope. It disrupts the present with the apocalyptic imagery of a world in which human civilization may well disappear. This is the third facet of the synchronicity of the nonsynchronous.

Science has been at the forefront of fighting climate change since the beginning. And it has been fighting the same uphill battle against skeptics, cynical politicians, and various corporate interests, not to mention reactionary anti-scientism. But here the difficulty is that the evidence is much less clear and immediately observable than with Covid19; signs of climate change may be distant, can be given ‘alternative’ explanations, and even when people recognize the problem, there is reluctance to change our personal lives and our economies. We need critical social sciences to reflect on the Anthropocene and the globally highly uneven distribution of causes, consequences and remedies; analyze the causal nexus between environmental catastrophes and large-scale global societal challenges like famines, wars, migrations/refugees; or reflect on the critique of the half-measures implemented so far (carbon emissions, cap and trade). Universities should and must be sites of radical alternative visions, places of thinking “otherwise” rather than being concerned with ranking tables, citation indexes and grant volume.

All three crises should alert us to the danger of complacency. And we must ask ourselves: did we as universities seize the moment to its fullest to insist on the possibility of radical change of our systems of care, of redistribution, of climate justice, of health data colonization, of change in public policies so they integrate future risks, and also futures that are differently imagined? What were the larger questions

we failed to ask? The pandemic hopefully taught us one virtue, humility. Humility in the face of our experience of not being able to fully control the world and especially nature as well as humility in the face of the limits of our knowledge. If the resulting caution teaches us the imperative of a sustainable use of our natural resources; and reminds us of the fragility of our existence, these would indeed be valuable lessons learnt. One task for us as universities could thus be to help develop meaningful strategies to cope with intellectual and existential uncertainty at the societal level by way of our research as well as at the individual level among the younger generation of our students by way of teaching. For many of our students coming from conflict zones, war and violence are features of everyday lives. These crises confront us with a paradox, namely the more we know, the more our uncertainty will increase as we realize ever more how little we know and how contingent that knowledge is. Among the most important lessons we can teach our students, but also society at large, would be that research and knowledge is not going to reduce that uncertainty. And yet act we must and act responsibly conscious of the limits of our knowledge, its situatedness, its embeddedness in the specificity of contexts.

Among the casualties of soft authoritarian practices even within some liberal democracies in the West, which I touched upon at the outset, is precisely an understanding of questions of perspectivity and positionalities. Universities are under attack financially, politically and ideologically almost everywhere. Critical sociology departments in leading British universities face closure as funding priorities change. The cases of Hungary and Poland are instructive for having respectively prohibited gender studies and folded social anthropology as disciplines into the field of religious studies. But take France, where gender studies, critical race theory and post-colonial studies have come under sustained attack using the argument that these are not disciplines but activism masquerading as academic knowledge.

Meanwhile, in Europe the far-right has now discovered the virtues of decolonization and post-colonial solidarities. In France, Renaud Camus, theorist of the so-called “Great Replacement”, has cast European societies as the so-called “indigenous victims” of “imminent colonization by immigrants”. In his view this “demographic colonization” is planned and executed by globalist elites. How far this far-right discourse has been mainstreamed into French political discourse is evident, for instance, in President Macron’s recent speech calling for “demographic re-armament” so that France can combat its falling fertility rate. The European far-right emphasizes the “right to difference” of the autochthonous native population whose languages and cultures they purportedly defend against liberal multiculturalism and the risks of becoming extinct due to losing the demographic race to (Muslim) migrants. In Russia, Putin has proclaimed his country’s leading role in an anti-colonial movement against “unipolar hegemony”. His chief ideologue, Alexander Dugin, sees Russia as a victim of Western imperialism and liberalism with its new gender

norms that blur the distinction between men and women and advocate for LGBTQI rights. Against a universal human rights agenda, Dugin asserts the right to cultural self-determination including every civilization's own definition of democracy.

Against the smothering embrace of Western universalism, what these far-right ideologues propose is a civilizational model based on islands of religious/cultural particularism. My own critique of Eurocentrism has argued instead for relationality as the central optic, trope and method. I have called attention to the entangled histories of modernities that bind various regions of the world into unequal inter-relationships, economic, cultural, political and intellectual. We all inhabit, albeit differently, a post-colonial world, one that bears the imprint of, and has been shaped by, the long shadow of centuries of imperial rule. As Frantz Fanon reminded us, Europe is as much a creation of the Third World, as the latter is a product of its unequal and asymmetrical relationships with Euro-America. It is this mutual imbrication and co-constitution of our histories and our futures that opens exciting pathways for truly collaborative knowledge production.