

Why do we not accept and give up?

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11.2.2021

Our defiance is persistent but also calm, unhurried, and long-term because the issue is serious: The future of this country is at stake.

What is a university?

What makes a university is a deep reaching question and unfortunately the answer is not too well known to the public. A university is not a simply a place for the transfer of knowledge, it is where knowledge is produced - of course, we are talking about a knowledge production based on honest and universal ethical principles and evaluated by multiple referees. Why is the university not just a place for the transfer of information? Because the main duty of university professors is not to simply convey information but also to convey *their ideas about this knowledge*. Moreover, they constantly reflect and expand on this knowledge, and do this also *together with their students*, by asking them to deliver *their own thoughts* about this knowledge. Likewise, a university is not a business. While Western countries grasp the first dimension well, sadly, in today's neoliberal, capitalist world, the comprehension of this second dimension – that a university is not a business - has dangerously eroded in the West as well. A university is a place that produces transformative information about the universe and everything in it. Precisely for this reason, a university professor's work is not 40 hours a week like that of an officer, because the questions we are curious about never leave us, hence, we constantly read and reread, narrate, and write. After all, it was this spirit that made Avicenna and the likes of him one of a kind and utterly different from those around them. Someone who does not have this passion for knowledge can only be a civil-servant-like academic, nothing beyond. And precisely for this reason, a professor's lectures cannot and should not remain the same from one year to the next, simply because during this period she herself has changed, has acquired new knowledge and produced new ideas. Therefore, universities must be dynamic places. They cannot be governed by uniform, static and punitive legislation. The only "untouchables" of universities are their universal principles necessary for an ethical search for truth. This, in turn, requires an autonomous practice of science. It is these values and principles that our university's senate in consultation with the entire faculty put into writing in 2012¹.

¹ see link

What is happening at Boğaziçi University and why?

In the midnight of January 1, some person was appointed as rector to our university, literally out of the blue. We were often told that this is how rector appointments are being made since the state-of-emergency decrees of 2016-2018 and asked what makes us think we are special. Yet the question of “what makes us think we are special” is a wrongly formulated question. The main question that should be asked is why other institutions that carry the title of being universities did not speak out as a whole against the injustices that have been inflicted on them for years, including these top-down, unconsented rector appointments. Let's imagine a "Gedankenexperiment" ... What would happen if Trump appointed some close ally to Harvard as president, or Boris Johnson to Oxford? The answer is quite easy, they would react exactly as we did... But this would not and could not happen over there because every country respects and protects its prestigious institutions with good reputations nationwide and internationally. It doesn't matter here whether Harvard or Oxford are private universities where the state or governments might be more reluctant to interfere. The same would have been true for Germany, for example, which has well-established and prestigious *public* universities. It is simply not acceptable for any university with a well-established reputation to get someone appointed without an inclusionary decision-making process.

In our struggle to protect the autonomy of our university and of *public universities in general* against state intervention, we all of a sudden found as our “counter-player,” not so much the Council of Higher Education but actually the head of this country, and even a convicted leader of a crime organization. But let this not divert our attention away from the main motivation of this article. I decided to write this article despite all the threats and the work load of our ongoing academic endeavors in this surreal environment. The article is not short but I hope you read it with patience.

From where does our force to resist take root?

A foreign reporter asked an interesting question the other day: How is it that your defiance is so persistent, what is it that gives you this resilience? As someone working in the field of psychology, this was one of the more original questions I received so far. Even though I had decided to stop giving press statements for a while to get some rest I felt the urge to not leave this question unanswered. I would like to repeat here what I told that reporter.

Apart from our country's frightening political climate, one of the most important reasons for our university to take such a firm stance together with all its constituents, i.e., students, professors, alumni and staff, is that what is at stake here is of utmost value. Resistance turns tenacious in two cases, (1) when there is *nothing* to lose, and (2) when there is *much* to lose. Our case corresponds to the second one, and accordingly, the form of our struggle has been an extremely transparent, non-

violent struggle that is based on truth and proceeds on the basis of universally acknowledged principles.

Boğaziçi University is an institution that this year has reached its 50th anniversary as a public university with a 158-year history. One of the most valued features of the institution is that since we are a free-of-charge public university, our students come from all over the country and host a considerable class diversity, with many of them being the first members of their families to attend college. These young people come here with a selection and placement exam for which they worked very hard, and receive a worldwide education without paying tuition fees.

Since I have been the coordinator of the undergraduate exchange and Erasmus program for the past fifteen years, I know from the feedback of our western incoming students that the level of the courses here is by no means lower than those at their universities, and they even find the way courses are taught here more questioning and “deep-reaching” than those at their own universities. Why? Because our students are young minds who are highly motivated, have big dreams for the future, and excite us with their thoughts and questions. When you have such students in your class, you feel tremendously motivated to give them as much as you can, and you know you get double the value for everything you give. This makes teaching incredibly fulfilling. The most important thing is that these young people can receive this education *equally*. In other words, unlike in private universities, where such students study as “a handful of smart students with scholarships” among a majority of students who come to school with million-lira cars at hand, students at public universities study with their head upright, and not as a community doomed to remain silent so that their scholarship is not cut. I hope that this exemplifies why good-quality *public universities* rather than private universities should be cherished in a country. Public universities have a unique climate that deserves to be protected.

Another very important value that we want to protect is the long-established *horizontal* rather than vertical organization of our institution. The fact that only our names are written on the doors of our offices is very much related to this. Whether you are a professor or a cleaning staff, on your door it is only your name that is written, no titles. Likewise, the strategy plan of our university is not something that some person can announce from their personal twitter account, as the newly appointed person did, to our dismay, to say the least. Instead, our five-year strategy plans are created by collecting the opinions and comments of *all departments*. In other words, it is *a collective effort* which brings about a strong ownership of those plans. Imagine a university that has a total of 81 strongly valued committees and commissions, from the scholarship commission to the natural life conservation commission, from the open science/open access commission to the scientific research and publication ethics board! Hundreds of faculty members work on these boards and commissions with this sense of collective responsibility. The goal here is to manage the large and delicate structure of a university in the most rational, transparent and accountable ways possible

given the available resources. And it is exactly this form of governance that we cherish as much as our students, and which we believe should set an example for *all public institutions in our country*. This is a value that even many universities in the West lack. We know from our colleagues abroad that many universities in the West have become excessively “commercialized”. Here, our goal is to endorse a system that is the very opposite of a system where faculty bows in front of a rector (as it is in almost all universities in Turkey) or acts as a vessel for big corporations (as we see in countries which endorse universities with executive boards governed by CEOs and the like). Because free, ethical, transparent and accountable science and education can only be carried out under the conditions of autonomous, self-governing public universities.

The horizontal structuring of our university did not come into being overnight. As I mentioned at the beginning of the article, based on a history of 158 years of experience, this horizontal structuring is closely tied to our strictly merit-based recruitment process. For example, candidates who apply to our department give a job talk and additionally a guest lecture in one of our official courses in the presence of at least 3-4 faculty members and, of course, their academic work is examined and evaluated meticulously before they are granted a job offer; the job offer decision is taken by a close-to-consensus vote within the department. Even during the dark times of the September 12, 1980 military coup, this university was one of the few that had resisted many of the pressures from Ankara to uniform and standardize universities. During my undergraduate years at Boğaziçi University in 1986-1990, the Council of Higher Education (formed by the military junta) forced all universities to administer 2 midterms + 1 final exam, or at other times, 1 midterm + 1 final exam to evaluate students. Yet, professors at my university disregarded these regulations and delivered their teaching and evaluations with the methods they thought correct both in educational and pedagogical terms. From my undergraduate education I still remember the papers that I wrote, not the written exams.

Imagine a university that has been receiving the lowest budget for years among now 209 universities. And imagine a university whose student numbers have increased steadily by nearly 30% since 2006, and at an even more accelerating speed particularly since 2010. Despite all that, this university insisted on allocating those tiny resources not to expensive senior management buildings and advertisement, but instead to student scholarships, research, and library facilities. And due to this strong education and research focus, it managed to stay among the top universities in this country, despite its utterly insufficient state budget. In the last four years, the number of students in my freshman course has doubled. I used to teach the course to 54 students, now I am teaching it to 94 students. Despite this, I tenaciously did not reduce the paper assignments, I did not decrease the amount of feedback I would write on each assignment, and I stubbornly learned the names of approximately 90% of 94 students so that when I would meet them on campus I could call them by their names. I do all this because of my firm, tenacious commitment to our university and its values.

So why do we not compromise our quality despite our unreasonably low annual budget and ever increasing number of students? Because of those brilliant young students who deserve this commitment. These young people absolutely do not deserve what is currently going on our country. And not just our students but any university or high-school student of this country does not deserve this appalling political penetration by the ruling power into schools and universities. Just like all the other public universities, our students, too, come from all over the country. Any student who might come from a family of farmers or workers, can grow hopes that they will not be doomed to the sufferings their parents had to go through. Instead, often for the first time, they can have a dream about their own future. Unfortunately, there are not many public universities left where these young people can receive a strongly academic and scientifically focused education of worldwide quality. The strongest faculties of Ankara University were literally destroyed during the state-of-emergency purges between 2016 and 2018, let alone the many other public universities which once had a decent reputation.

Does a country “handcuff” its future?

The cleaning lady of my eighty-five years old aunt told her about her son who is a university student in Izmir. Apparently, her son was one of the students who were beaten, rear-handcuffed and taken into custody by police, while peacefully demonstrating in Izmir on Friday last week in support of Bogazici University’s resistance. He was released at three o'clock in the morning, arriving home all in pain, asking his mother to heal his wounds... I can't even imagine that mother's pain, and my aunt told me that she constantly kept asking to herself why they beat her son. Yes, why would a state beat its youth, that is, its future?

When our students graduate, I wish them an “open path” (as we would call it in Turkish) for their future careers because they come here based on merit and they graduate based on merit. And it is for this reason that even families who vote for the AKP continue sending their children to our university, despite the fact that our institution has been demonized by the ruling party particularly since 2016. And why is that even AKP voters still send their children to our university? Because ultimately every good parent wants their child to get the best education. They know that their children will have professors who are employed based on merit and take their work and their responsibilities towards their students seriously. And it is this desire and trust of the families, whether educated or uneducated, wealthy or poor, that makes this place special as a public university. Likewise, it is precisely for this reason that when our students come here from diverse parts of the country, they are able to meet different individuals and perspectives, instead of individuals that are “all like them” as they might have been in the small towns from where they came... I think this is exactly what makes the current regime, which one might now call a regime of “unconsented power”, most uncomfortable.

For all these reasons, our resistance will be very firm, persistent, but at the same time very calm, unhurried, and long-lasting. Because what is at stake is the future of this country, this is not something to joke about. That reporter finally asked how we go through this process

psychologically. The answer to this is unfortunately a heavy one... Think of a faculty member whose eight-year-old daughter asks whether they might also arrest her mom. I am afraid this is enough to explain everything.