

The Democratic University and its Role in Modern Democracy

UNICA Rectors' Seminar

“The key role of the Humanities in our universities”

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens

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Introduction

- UNICA General Assembly held in Athens – a city symbolic of democracy.
- Context: regional and global transformations affecting Europe and its universities.
- Structure of presentation:
 1. Modern democracy,
 2. Democratic university,
 3. University's democratic role.

Thucydides' text

ἐνι τε τοῖς αὐτοῖς οἰκείων ἅμα καὶ πολιτικῶν ἐπιμέλεια, καὶ ἑτέροις πρὸς ἔργα τετραμμένοις τὰ πολιτικὰ μὴ ἐνδεῶς γνῶναι· μόνοι γὰρ τὸν τε μηδὲν τῶνδε μετέχοντα οὐκ ἀπράγμονα, ἀλλ' ἀχρεῖον νομίζομεν, καὶ οἱ αὐτοὶ ἦτοι κρίνομέν γε ἢ ἐνθυμούμεθα ὀρθῶς τὰ πράγματα, οὐ τοὺς λόγους τοῖς ἔργοις βλάβην ἡγούμενοι, ἀλλὰ μὴ προδιδαχθῆναι μᾶλλον λόγῳ πρότερον ἢ ἐπὶ ᾧ δεῖ ἔργῳ ἐλθεῖν.

Translation

It happens in our city that the same people take care of both private and public affairs and, despite our different occupations, are fully informed about public affairs. We are the only ones who consider anyone who does not participate in public affairs to be useless and not a person who just looks after his own business. It is we ourselves who either decide on the various issues or submit them to appropriate study, because we believe that discussion does not harm action, but what is more harmful is *not to inform ourselves in advance* through discussion about those things on which we must take action (2. 40.2).

Modern Democracy

- I have used the term *modern democracy* to refer specifically to representative democracy, and more precisely, to the form of democracy that has developed in Europe over the past fifty years.
- Shift from direct to representative democracy.
- Representation has replaced participation.
- Full-time politicians dominate decision-making.

Underlying Fear in Democracies

- Fear of authoritarianism persists.
- Power imbalances, disillusionment, external threats.
- Similar fears existed in ancient Athens.

Historical Lessons

- Athenian democracy faced external and internal challenges.
- Criticism by Plato and Demosthenes reveals civic concerns.
- Democracy is fragile, never guaranteed.

Is Democracy Declining Today?

- V-Dem Report 2025: clear signs of autocratization.
- The outlook on the world at the end of 2024 is worse than in the last 25 years.
- Democracy is receding globally and within the EU.

Key Data from V-Dem

- Nearly 3 out of 4 persons in the world –72% – now live in autocracies. This has been the highest since 1978.
- The world now has 88 democracies and 91 autocracies. This is a full reversal from last year (=91 democracies and 88 autocracies) and happens for the first time in over 20 year
- Almost all aspects of democracy are declining in more countries than they are improving, compared to ten years ago. Concerning the elections held in 2024 around the world, there were more countries with negative (7) than positive (4) changes of trajectories.
- The trend toward autocratization also concerns the EU; many of its member states are moving in this direction in various ways.

21st Century Threats

- Not coups, but polarization and misinformation.
- Citizens and governments overlook democratic principles.
- Fake news and state manipulation rising in the West.

A Democratic University

- It is democratically organized in its internal structure and governance;
- It is free from external political interference or institutionally equipped to resist such interference, when necessary;
- Its academic community recognizes the value of institutional democracy and is committed to defending it.

The politics of knowledge

- What is taught and researched is not politically neutral.
- Dialogue with state is inevitable.
- Need to distinguish between engagement and interference.

Academic Freedom

- Depends on autonomy and democratic environment.
- University leadership must be elected by the academic community.
- Faculty governance over administrative leadership.

Internal Power Dynamics

- Wrong perception of the hierarchy can subvert democratic ideals.
- Abuse of authority suppresses dissent; silences or prevents opposition, criticism, alternative viewpoints.
- The internal culture should embody the principles of democratic governance and a continuous commitment to eliminating any undue inequality among community members.

The stance of academic community

- It recognizes the critical importance of true institutional autonomy and of a democratic mode of internal governance.
- Decisions must be inclusive and transparent.
- Participation strengthens democratic values.
- University autonomy is understood as the ideal framework that enhances accountability to society.
- Democratic governance also facilitates academic excellence.

Precurity and Democracy

- Job insecurity undermines participation.
- Fear limits critical inquiry.
- Solid employment is necessary for democratic engagement.

University's Role in Defending Democracy

- Universities remain democratic beacons.
- They can react to the crisis they face as traditional institutions.
- They can reclaim their voice and mission as basic agents in advancing democracy.

The present state of affairs

- The legislative and judicial branches fail to sufficiently restrain the executive power.
- The media are plagued by propaganda and misinformation.
- Opposition is forced to silence in various ways
- In such a context, the **role of universities** in supporting democracy becomes both **more crucial and more central**.

Current Academic Discourse

Growing publications on university-democracy links:

- The Universities promote democracy by promoting critical thinking, serving as spaces for free inquiry and debate, encouraging civic participation, advancing equity and inclusion, and modeling democratic governance.
- They produce and disseminate scientific and technical knowledge that can be used to analyze and critique public policy.
- They facilitate social mobility

How can the university fulfill its role in supporting democracy?

- Emphasis on participation and practical engagement
- Philosophical grounding: Plato
“Unless philosophers become rulers or rulers genuinely pursue philosophy, there will be no end to the misfortunes of cities, nor to those of humanity” (Republic 473C-D).
 - *Politics needs philosophy.
 - *Politics needs pursuit of knowledge and ethical leadership

Democratic Education

- Extend university education as widely as possible.
- Balance specialization with a deep humanistic/“philosophical” education.
- Ethics must be central to democratic education.

The educational methodology

- Philosophical grounding: Aristotle

“The virtues are engendered in us neither by nature nor yet in violation of nature; nature gives us the capacity to receive them, and this capacity is brought to maturity by habit” (NE 1103a).

*Virtue is formed through habit, not nature.

*Democratic character must be cultivated.

Policy for Democracy

- Explicit commitment to democratic education.
- Theory alone insufficient to support democracy.
- Democratic governance trains democratic citizens.
- Embed critical and constructive thinking.
- Rule of law, justice, and freedom must be practiced.
- Freedom must be lived, not just taught.

Conclusion

- Let us be inspired by ancient Athens and enhance participation!
- Universities must be models of participatory democracy, committed to truth, freedom, justice.
- In this way, they can uphold democratic values in both theory and practice, serve as models of democratic governance, and support democracy more broadly.
- Responsibility lies with all academic members.

Final Words – Pericles Revisited

- Substitute 'city' with 'university' in Pericles' vision.
- Democracy demands participation and informed discourse.
- “Discussion does not harm action...”

Thank You

Σας ευχαριστώ – Thank you!