

## Epistemologies of Academic Freedom

4 October 2021

### Summary

The University Wide Seminar on the Epistemologies of Academic Freedom, gathering CEU and Open Society University Network academic communities, looked into the concept of Academic Freedom. **Milica Popović**, Research Fellow at the OSUN Global Observatory on Academic Freedom was chairing the event, introducing the speakers and the debate.

**Liviu Matei**, CEU Provost, initiated the reflection through questioning whether the epistemology of academic freedom is considered as a scholarly or a practical endeavor, and asserting that it is indeed both. Matei presented various approaches to the epistemology of AF, through a historical overview of epistemological approaches of both scholars and relevant international organizations, including UNESCO, European Higher Education Area, AAUP and the United Nations, and concluding that there is a lack of an up-to-date, shared and adapted conceptual reference of AF. Proposing an anthropology of epistemology, Matei inquired the place of antisemitism and racism in rationalist conceptualization of AF in Europe and criticized the lack of understanding of science as a situated social practice.

**Maria Kronfeldner**, Professor at the Department of Philosophy at the CEU, argued for the need to go beyond a progressivist defense of AF. Looking at the issue from the lense of philosophy of science, Kronfeldner zoomed onto the rationalist conception and the progressivist defense of AF, also known as the argument from truth, which claims that AF is necessary for epistemic progress. Counterarguing this understanding, Kronfeldner successfully outlined that old truths also need protection (through the example of Holocaust denial), that progress in science is not always necessarily taking place with AF (through the example of military funding) and that the reference to progress can be abused by authoritarian governments (through the example of Hungary in recent years). In her positive proposal for a new augmented concept of AF, she claimed that one needs to go beyond a concept that talks about the absence of disabling and presence of enabling conditions only. The core of AF needs to be conceptualized, Kronfeldner claimed, with reference to independence of thinking, with which comes responsibility, diversity, and objectivity, core values of serious academic engagement.

**Milica Popović**, Research Fellow at the OSUN Global Observatory on Academic Freedom, inquired the relationship between the concept of epistemic injustices, as understood by Miranda Fricker, and AF and how prejudices serve as an obstacle to truth. Presenting the key elements of the concept of epistemic injustices, both testimonial and hermeneutical, Popović argued how they create disruptions in the flow of critical knowledge and represent a wider epistemic loss. Such epistemic silencing practices further reproduce structural societal power relations and structural injustices which prevent full implementation of AF within and beyond academic communities. Asking the question who defines AF and for whom, Popović raised the issue of structural inequalities in geopolitical terms between the Global North and the Global South, as well as in hierarchical structures of academic communities and opened the reflected on how they further influence the endeavors for reconceptualization of AF and its operative implementation in regulatory frameworks and monitoring mechanisms.

**Kwadwo Appiagyei-Atua**, Professor at the School of Law of the University of Ghana, exposed the specificities of the African context and different understandings of coloniality which should inform AF discourses. Outlining the physical and the intellectual aspects of colonialism, as well as reproductive use of repressive colonial powers, Appiagyei-Atua showed how the process of accumulation of Western knowledge took place through dispossession of indigenous knowledge. This way the knowledge is established by Western canons, produced by white male scientists, and is being appropriated by certain elites creating knowledge asymmetries. Destruction of indigenous universities, legal systems, imposition of international law canons all further contributed to the fact that people who produce knowledge did not necessarily benefit from it. With the lack of recognition of original African ideas, large portions of knowledge are appropriated or forgotten and erased.

Further discussion opened the issues of the relationship between independent thinking and autonomy, as well as legal perspectives and the imposition of new ideologies of usefulness of knowledge as a major threat through the lack of democratic governance and self-governance of academic communities. The colonial and hegemonic epistemologies continue to thrive across the globe, notably in the European and American contexts, preventing the development of just and richer epistemologies of Academic Freedom.