
Discussion Paper Series
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Sciences, Research and Excellency in Europe

Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Conference 2018

Opening Keynote

Ulrike Guérot

MSCA 2018

Am 1. Und 2. Oktober 2018 lud das Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung in das Haus der Ärztegesellschaft in Wien zu einer Marie Skłodowska-Curie Maßnahmen Konferenz ein.

Die Konferenz, welche gemeinsam mit der Europäischen Kommission im Rahmen der österreichischen Ratspräsidentschaft ausgerichtet wurde, bot die Möglichkeit die aktuellen Entwicklungen zu Horizon 2020 sowie Horizon Europe zu diskutieren.

In der einleitenden Keynote beschäftigte sich Prof. Dr. Ulrike Guérot mit der aktuellen Situation der Forschungslandschaft innerhalb Europas.

Vienna, October 1st, 2018

„Sciences, Research and Excellency in Europe“

Dear Madams & Sirs,

Dear Guests of the MSCA Annual Conference,

Marie Curie was a great women and I admire her. If you haven't seen the gorgeous film about her, please do so! The movie is another good example how important the early feminist battle to open Alma Mata for women was, but also another striking example for the fact that a word of wisdom, or a scientific discovery such as X-rays, that comes out of a male mouth, is always superior. Even outstanding Marie Curie had to suffer from this.

Dear Guests, there are invitations you wonder why you receive them. You should decline them by reflex, but then they make you curious: Your invitation to hold the keynote speech at the MSCAs Annual Conference 2018 was one of those! I checked out the MSCA website, I found the standardized photo of a microscope that triggers “natural science”, I didn't find a much about social sciences or humanities and intuitively, I didn't like the website. Nothing in for me, why should I go?

I am not a natural scientist, I don't belong to your networks, I barely know the work of MSCA – so the question is: why did you chose me? As everybody knows, a keynote speaker is not a random choice, so you must have had some thoughts approaching me. To meet your expectations, I would need to engage into some detective work to figure out what you tacitly might have been hoping for what I would say about the broad topic “Science, Research & excellency in Europe”.

On the other hand, I am in an optimal position: As I am in no close relationship to you, I do not need to please you. I can deliver my thoughts, nothing is at stake for me and having nothing to lose increases, as Janis Joplin has put it, the realm of freedom.

With this introduction, you know now, that I never did science management, I never cared much for the history of science or science production, let alone the theory or philosophy of sciences or epistemology. I am just a humble political scientist, trained and educated in the 80s, in a quite different academic environment than today's universities. In an environment, where methodology wasn't the key question, where study was more in a Humboldt'schen sense the pursuit of your own curiosity, where professors and disciples sometimes had an in-depth intellectual relationship, where students would read books and not pre-selected PDF-files, and where Bologna reform hadn't yet streamlined universities into a sort of academic "H&M" franchise, full of ECTS and standards, but emptied out of quality many times.

So what can I deliver other than some personal observations about science, academics, universities, studies and students in general, and where I am experiencing them: in my work and my surroundings. Obviously, I had no time to do some deeper research, so please, don't expect from me data or figures on European excellency cluster, impact analysis of European networks, synergy evaluation, the value of mobility or anything the like about your tomorrow's topics.

I only come with some observations, hopefully some salient questions and the Socratic method, which is to ask. And my question is the famous one of Niklas Luhmann: Was ist der Fall? What is the case? Und was steckt dahinter? An what is behind?

As political scientist, if I have to treat the topic "Europe and Science and how to strive for excellency", something very different comes to my mind, and I apologize for this deviation of thought, which might kick you of your routine. My question is, how, despite so much money spent on research, so much science promotion, academic synergies, networks, mobility & conferences like today, we are losing the system. We are losing the people for Europe, who are turning their backs to the EU; we are losing democracy, freedom and rule of law. And even academics shift baselines – or remain silent. Our political systems are turning nationalist, populist and, in tendency, racist. They put human rights again into questions and play security against freedom, although we know that security is nice to have, but not a value in itself. We spend much money and energy on research on security and resilience, and we do so with ever more data, digitalization, algorithm, robotics and automatization. We call everything digitalised 'smart',

without asking what is smart about a bed that tells me my sleeping temperature and whether I need it. Worse, we are advancing AI – artificial intelligence – knowing that pure intelligence is often as cruel like a knife's edge and that therefore, men has always been aspiring for reason (“Vernunft”), not for intelligence. “Vernunft ist durch das Herz gebrochener Verstand”, said Immanuel Kant. But which heart will the Androids have?

What does it mean to strive for scientific excellency in such an environment? Especially in the field of the humanities? Or, to turn the question around: what does it mean to promote scientific and academic excellency in an increasingly unfree environment? Is freedom a condition for excellency? We perhaps took for granted that excellency can be nurtured only in a free environment as much as we thought, for too long, that a free market economy requires a democracy to function – until the Chinese proved that wrong.

So let me give you now 5 short personal comments or observations about the European academic and research environment in my field, European studies, leading to five questions. To say this upfront: I will deliver no answers and my observations may be completely irrelevant or even wrong for your realm, which is natural science. If they are, I apologize!

Let's start questioning the paradigm: why excellency? Is good not enough, as people's mouth says? The “Better is the enemy of the good” is old wisdom. The scientific underpinning behind is pareto optimum: you need roughly 20% of your energy to achieve 80% of most tasks. If you want to achieve 100% (let's say 100% is excellency), you need to mobilize 80% of your energy to go from 80% to 100%. It's like with pianists: Many are good. Only a few are excellent. But does a society need more than a few really excellent pianists? Is it then a wise decision for a society – in the field of research, science or anywhere else – to strive for excellency as a collective goal, if excellency, by definition, can only affect a few? And even if so: can excellency be “produced”, just like any other thing, just because we decide to produce excellency? It seems to be rather the opposite: the excellency of Bill Gates or Mark Zuckerberg both inventing the new global cybernetic system started in a garage, without a grant and in no research environment.

The other problem with the focus of excellency is: what do we do with those people, researchers or students, who aren't excellent? Who are just good. Good enough to teach, good enough to

research, good enough to write good books? Won't they get good working conditions, good and stable pay and a good research environment, while rendering the necessary stability and perseverance for an academic system, which cannot only live from a few excellent people at its top?

Excellency in sciences seems to correlate to the neo-liberal turn, which is all about distinction – but most of the time by money; not by real excellency. An indicator is the growing number of private schools, institutes and faculties, all labelled excellent, partly at horrendous fees. But it seems to me that there is no statistically relevant correlation between European excellency clusters, innovation and Nobel prizes.

In addition, social science tells us that “meritocracy”, which is the governing of the best, doesn't work so well. A society is not a school, where only the best go through and are successful. A society is a whole, where everybody needs a place and space, independent from the fact, whether he or she is excellent. If most of the research money goes to excellency, resources are taken away from others. So what, if excellency splits society, instead of supporting society?

And lastly: who decides about what is excellent? Galileo certainly was excellent; yet nobody wanted to believe him when he discovered first that the earth is turning.

So in essence: might it be that the aim to institutionalize excellency is overrated? And if so, which conclusion would need to be drawn from of this?

Let me deepen that thought about what is excellent. In social science, there is today a huge research ongoing about populism, the rise of nationalism, identitarian thinking and where does it come from. Data have been accumulated, libraries of DOI-number peer reviewed articles have been filled, articles, which – by the way – nobody reads. I guess seldom before there were so many data available about a society, voter behaviour etc. Yet, nobody saw Brexit or Trump coming. Huge amounts of EU research money have been given, through Horizon 2020, towards research on populism. But science and research can only endorse and study ex-post, what has been building up in our societies ex-ante. Something of our prognosis capacity or early societal alert systems have been – despite all this research money – completely failing.

Perhaps the problem is that everybody is so busy today with being excellent in order to secure the next two years of a precarious university position that nobody has time to think about what is

going on in the world? Nobody has the time to ask the Luhmann-question: Was ist der Fall? Und was steckt dahinter? A little bit like today's underdog workers, who are too busy to get syndicated? No time to ask, no time to protest... I remember being three months at the WZB, the German Social Research Centre, where a study group was discussing the reasons of European democracy failing. I uttered in a meeting that we should write newspaper articles about this to make them public. But writing newspaper articles is wasted time for somebody striving for scientific excellency. A newspaper article doesn't feed the criteria for academic promotion.

Hannah Arendts 'Banality of Evil' for instance, a theoretical paradigm for fascists societies, was – if I trust the movie about her life – born on a sofa, while she was smoking. Heinrich Popitz theoretical observations about power, written in the 70s, describing the change of an order only by pointing to those who are just perky enough to occupy the sunlounger with their towels, and from their, claim possession, from there dominance, and from there a new order, didn't need a footnote, nor a set of data to scrutinize so eloquently the features of power. That description is probably, on a few pages, more telling about what the AfD does to the political system in Germany these days than kilotons of data.

Not sure whether both, Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Popitz, would end up in an excellency cluster of social research today. I would rather bet that both would not even get a professorship in our times. Hannah Arendt was alone most of the time, sitting in libraries, not at conferences. She was certainly mobile, but not in a cluster. Popitz, by modern standards, wasn't so much mobile, spend most of his time stable in Southern Germany, with a year in New York at the New School as the one exception. Perhaps, Muße (leisure) and stability do more than excellency and mobility? And what would that mean for post-modern research and sciences, and for MSCA, if it were so?

Finally, what do excellency cluster do with those who are excellent, but not in compliance with mainstream thoughts? ETH Zurich is doing interesting meta-research, why Europe today – despite all money invested in sciences & research – is losing its best brains, and thus, its capacity for innovation. Because brains do not want to be given the topic or field of research. Best brains are often out of the system, just because they criticise the system. Can Horizon 2020, can the MSCA excellency cluster deal with this? And capture the most creative and innovative brains for European Science and the public good?

There seems to be a real goal conflict in European science management by wanting streamlined research clusters on the one hand, and creative innovation on the other, both being reciprocally excluding. In other words: how does excellency, which evokes swarm intelligence, handles Querdenker?

Brains don't want to go like Lemmings researching on what everybody is researching, only because the money is there. Yet, if you are a professor or a PDD today in Europe, your chances to finance your department or your doctorate outside of jobs created through Horizon 2020 are rather slim. This leads to occupying the bulk of European academics – talking humanities – writing grant applications instead of good teaching books. If you were cynical, you could say that Horizon 2020 is a sort of 'occupation therapy' for academics who, if Horizon 2020 were not there, probably had no job; but that doesn't give you an indication on whether the perpetual mobile of Horizon 2020 is of any good or relevance for ardent societal question. If you were even more cynical, you might argue that the whole system is, to a large part, a self-exhausting rotation, put into place by capital to sedate young academics or to let them perish in underpaid junior professorships. In more aesthetic words, one could say, that if "form follows function" was the motto and claim of Bauhaus, then modern European science and research often produces 'form without function.' And this, with respect to European democracies, now turns into a political real-life tragedy!

When society finally started to criticize the structures of the EU and got rid of the sui generis argument, the Commission again spent millions – this time not for sciences, but for PR – to 'better explain' the EU. Through flyers and other advertising material, the goal was to better 'inform' or 'teach' people about the EU. But is 'better information' a good answer to inherently flawed structures? I am born 1964, so I am Pink Floyd generation. Pink Floyd generation means that "We don't need no education. We don't need no thought control." In essence, this is what the so-called populist do today with the EU. They break down the EU-wall of thought control.

In European studies, I can give you examples. Hundreds of Jean-Monnet Professorships throughout the EU have written textbooks for the next generation of students, all of which say that the EU is a political system sui generis. Nobody asked the Luhmann-question: Was ist der Fall? Und was steckt dahinter? What does this mean, sui generis? Is this good? Is this a democratic

system? Is it legitimized? And what, if not? Probably, as a Jean Monnet professor, it wouldn't have been so wise to pose that question. Yet, this is how we left the valid question about the legitimacy of the European system to the so-called populist: there dared to speak up and say, as Boris Johnson put it during the Brexit campaign: "We are not in control". And he is right. Unfortunately, so! These trends all could have been observed, with open eyes, if personal observation would still be a criterion for research – like for the Durkheim's and Bourdieu's of the world - instead of today's data fetishism; and if travel grants could have been used to just travel around and watch, instead of going to conferences to compare and measure data on populism in closed conference rooms.

Instead of posing these relevant question, one year after the other, the annual framework programs of Horizon 2020, first, brushed thousands of European professors and students to do work on multi-level-governance (which barely functions), then made them work on subsidiarity, whereas sovereignty in Europe is the issue; and now shifts them to study "citizen's participation" or "civil society impact", where power is the key question in the EU's political system. Is this wise? My book on "Why Europe needs to become a Republic. A political utopia" has been published, in the meantime, around 30.000 times – which is far beyond academic standards. It has certainly influenced the public and academic (!) debate on Europe more than dozens of Horizon 2020 papers. But I had no grant, no money and, at the beginning, not even a publishing house who wanted to print the book.

The conclusion to draw from all this might be: let people decide what they want to research on. Don't cluster them. Don't push them into topics. Just give money to good people and then trust them and let these people in peace for a while. Give them stability to think freely, instead of stressing them with mobility, grant proposals, evaluations and networks. There is enough empirical evidence showing that grant proposal selection is more a lottery than anything else; that the evaluation of research projects is often a favour; and that the risk of a too tight peer review system is academic incest. And incest always leads to deformation. As we are today in Vienna, I want to use this occasion to point to the brilliant book of Paul Konrad Liessman "Bildung als Provokation", which is a perfect deconstruction of Bologna. In a nutshell, the essence of the book

is that Bologna would need to stop, if science and research - in the noble meaning of the word – are to survive in Europe.

The problem with the English language is, that it does not provide a clear distinction between education as Erziehung and Education as Bildung. Or between Education as Bildung and Education as Ausbildung. Yet, Bildung is always more than professional training. You can be trained in an excellent way; and still not pose a single valid question. That's the moment, where a society is at risk to lose the system – and freedom altogether. Because, as Martin Heidegger once put it: "Die Wissenschaft denkt nicht". Science does not think. Yet, thinking does not start with excellency, but with questions, as Socrates showed us.

You can also be very well educated or trained and still believe in "Evidenzbasierte Politik", ('evidence-based politics') one of the current buzz-words of the Austrian new government, without realizing that evidence is a hybrid, that there is no ultimate truth, that Karl Popper or Paul Feyerabend have taught us in the last century that all scientific knowledge is relative, awaiting falsification. But first and foremost, that politics and evidence are a *contradictio in adjecto*: politics is all about choice, not about evidence, as evidence is always standpoint-related. Your evidence could be, for example, to argue that child labour must stop, as it is evident that a child needs a school. Or you can argue that it is evident that abandoning child labour comes at huge costs, which evidently are unbearable. So choose your evidence, but politics is precisely to make things regardless of evidence, just because you want it that way! And that's precisely what the Austrian government does, e.g. when building a third runway at Vienna airport, despite the evidence of the climate collapse we are in.

There are more stories to underpin what I just said. A last word, looking at a recent experience. I had a job vacation, and, just last week, interviewed 6 out of 30 candidates in total, all very qualified. Although in pure academic standards, I am rather a nobody (meaning: not so many peer reviewed articles on my CV, no Horizon 2020 Grant etc.), truly excellent people applied. Most of them had more on their CV at age 25 than what I ever learned or did. And all answered on the

question why they applied for for my Department which has a strong transdisciplinary focus:

“Because I want to move things.” Move things!!! Not being excellent!

There is a young generation out there in European studies who is eager to chance things, because they smell that there is a European system coming down. If – as MSCA – you want to help or promote them: give them untight money. A lot of untight money. They are very smart. They will know how to use the money to build their Europe, the Europe, they want! Let them experience with European Blockchain-democracy, crypto-currencies or crypto nations. Let them conceptualize a European basic income, or a European Social Security Assurance, whatever: give them the chance to reshuffle the system and to move things...

They will need to model a new European democracy, they will quickly need to create a legitimate power base for a different European political system, because the current one is dying. And then, they will need to run it. Because that’s what elites normally do: they run the system. Smart people always want more than money: they want power and they want to shape the future!

Yet, Europe’s bright youth has no political system to run, no European unemployment scheme to manage, so as to care for the modernisation loser who go vote UKIP or FPÖ or Rassemblement National. No convincing European GAFA – Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple – to develop through which they could secure the next level of innovation and competitiveness in Europe. No European redemption fund, in order to control the solidity of the European financial system. No European government to allow taking bold positions towards powers such as Turkey, China or Russia, all three affecting Europe one like the other. No European security policy to strategically put into place, in order to secure peace on the continent. In short: today’s bright European youth has no European system in their hands to secure their future and to make the world a better place!

Hence, highly trained and completely cosmopolitan, multi-lingual etc., the 30 percent among current age cohorts, who are above the Gaus’ normal distribution in terms of intelligence – and that’s the third any system must count on to function – don’t aspire positions in national administrations or politics neither. Because that’s too boring. The vacuum is filled by populist forces. Most European youngsters go NGOs, where they build a different, better Europe, the one they are dreaming off. The modern NGO or civil society activism corresponds, in that sense, to Agamben’s monastery, where the smartest went in the dark middle ages, when times were swinging.

And times are swinging again. It will be very important, where the bulk of academia will be positioning itself in this 'post-modern condition of sciences', as François Lyotard had already put it in the 80s. In a time, in which no great meta-narrative works. In a time, where we realize perhaps more than ever that there is no truth, because we are experiencing the complete deconstruction of the world as it has been: the deconstruction of institutions, systems, belief systems, gender, authorities, societies, and what have you.

Probably a time to invest more in thinking and in retreat, in critics and perhaps even in resistance, than in anything else. Let alone, that the CO2 footprint of the academic conference business is significantly counterproductive to the most important goal of mankind today, which is climate protection. Yet, all that is quite the opposite of excellency, networks, skills and mobility, which are the topics of your tomorrow's agenda. In that sense, let me finish with Blaise Pascal: "All evil in the world stems from the fact, that men can't sit still."

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