

Editorial

Stop the Assault on Brazilian Philosophy and Sociology!

ON FRIDAY 26 APRIL 2019, the President of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, announced on Twitter that his government plans to withdraw all funding from university programmes in philosophy and sociology.¹ This was a confirmation of previous statements to the same effect by his Minister of Education. Bolsonaro’s justification for this drastic move was as follows: “The goal is to focus on areas that will have immediate return to taxpayers, such as veterinary medicine, engineering, and medicine.”

The professions need philosophy

This decision is based on at least three serious mistakes. The *first mistake* is the belief that students in profession-oriented educations such as the three he mentioned have no need for philosophy or sociology. In order to become fully competent professionals they all need high-quality education in ethics. Medical ethics is a crucial component of the education of physicians. In addition, modern medical research frequently involves difficult ethical issues, which is another reason why ethical teaching and research is a self-evident constituent of modern medical faculties. For similar reasons, veterinarians have to study both veterinary ethics and the closely related subjects of animal welfare and animal ethics. Engineers need education in engineering ethics, with specializations in areas such as computer ethics, the ethics of biotechnology, etc. Teachers in these and other areas of applied ethics must have competence in moral philosophy, which can only be obtained in universities that teach and do research in philosophy.

The situation is similar for sociology. Physicians specializing in public health and preventive medicine need a thorough understanding of social phenomena and mechanisms. This requires access to qualified competence in sociology as well as other social sciences. Engineers working with complex socio-technological systems, such as the introduction of driverless vehicles and other forms of artificial intelligence, are equally dependent on cooperation with sociologists and other social scientists.

Many more examples of this could be given. The profession-oriented disciplines favoured by Jair Bolsonaro and his government are so closely interconnected with philosophy and sociology that they will all suffer severely from the planned defunding, in terms of both quality and international standing.

¹ <https://twitter.com/jairbolsonaro/status/1121713534402990081>.

Philosophy contributes to innovations

The *second mistake* is the assumption that practically useful results from research and education are best obtained by only funding activities that are predicted to have immediate practical applicability. The major reason why this does not work for research is that the most innovative technologies tend to depend heavily on investigations aimed at basic understanding rather than immediate applicability. For instance, the major advances of modern medicine would have been unthinkable without significant research efforts devoted to improving our understanding of basic chemistry and biology. Modern engineering would have been impossible without access to mathematical methods that were developed with no view to practical usefulness. In a previous editorial we summarized this in terms of a paradox:

This is the *paradox of usefulness in research*: if you focus too one-sidedly on research that you know to be directly useful, you may miss out on unexpected discoveries in other fields with a much larger potential for useful applications. To provide research funding only to projects with foreseen practical applications is about as counterproductive as trying to spend every second of one's life in the way that will produce most happiness. (Hansson, 2017, p. 2)

Importantly, this paradox applies to philosophical research as well. Digital computing is based on formal logic. The logic that made computers possible was the outcome of two-and-a-half millennia of philosophical strivings to understand the structure of rational reasoning. These investigations aimed at basic understanding, but in the end they gave us the intellectual tools needed to develop technologies that are now thoroughly reshaping human societies.

A fine example can be found in Brazilian philosophy. Philosophical logicians in Brazil have led the development of paraconsistent logic, which is currently used as an important tool of software engineering all around the world. It should also be mentioned that the high level of philosophical logic in Brazil is one of the factors that has contributed to the strong development of computer science in that country.

Overemphasis on direct practical application is equally dangerous in education. It is not sufficient to teach physicians and veterinarians the methods of diagnosis and therapy that are currently available. They must also be capable of continuously learning new methods and approaches, throughout their professional lives. For this they need an education that is broad enough to provide them with basic understanding of physiology, biochemistry and other subjects related to human biology. They also need sufficient grounding in ethics to be able to deal with the new ethical problems that are sure to emerge in the practice of their respective disciplines. The situation is similar in other disciplines that prepare students for specific professions. In societies that change at an increasing pace, we need to

put more emphasis on the general knowledge and capabilities that students will need in order to cope with what the future holds.

Philosophy is part of human culture

The *third mistake* is the notion that research and education can only be justified if they produce outcomes of a material kind, such as innovations and technological development. A country's research and education are part of its cultural traditions, and culture is a large part of what makes us civilized. Philosophy, in particular, has a strong role as conveyer of ideas for existential and ethical reflection in both private and public life. Relinquishing a country's philosophy, or other important parts of its research and education, is as self-belittling as closing down its film studios, theatres, museums or libraries.

The cultural loss is particularly grave if the targeted discipline has a strong tradition in the country, and that is certainly true in this case. Brazilian philosophers have had a large and lasting impact not only on their own country's intellectual and cultural life, but also internationally. Paulo Freire, Newton da Costa and Walter Carnielli are three among many eminent examples of this. The tradition is carried on for instance by Catarina Dutilh Novaes and Otávio Bueno, editors-in-chief of the leading philosophical journal *Synthese*. They are both Brazilians who were educated in philosophy in their home country.

And it is strange, to say the least, that this assault on philosophy and sociology takes place in the only country in the world whose flag carries a motto that refers to the thoughts of a major thinker who was both a philosopher and a sociologist. The text "ordem e progresso" (order and progress) on the flag is an abbreviated form of a statement by the French philosopher Auguste Comte (Faustino and Gasparin, 2001, p. 161). Comte has been immensely influential in Brazilian intellectual and political life. He was also a pioneer sociologist, and it was he who introduced the word "sociology" to denote that discipline (Guilhaumou, 2006).

Why philosophy and sociology?

Why, among all the disciplines that are not entirely devoted to preparing students for a profession, have philosophy and sociology been selected for defunding by the Brazilian government? That we do not know, but given the political context it is reasonable to assume that this has something to do with a feature that these two disciplines have in common: they both provide tools for critical thinking about social issues.

We philosophers must stand up for our colleagues in Brazil, and of course also for the sociologists who are in the same dire situation. But this is not an issue only for philosophers and sociologists. When those in power choose to oust entire disciplines, then no other discipline is safe from their interference. At stake is

nothing less than the existence of independent academic research and teaching. Therefore, this should be a matter of concern to everyone who prefers knowledge to ignorance, and informed critical reflection to prejudice. We should all express our solidarity with the Brazilian students, teachers and researchers who are now under assault. We should make it known that educators, academics and concerned citizens around the world are shocked and offended by these attacks on internationally renowned teaching and research that should instead be a source of great pride for the Brazilian government.

An open letter of protest is available at <http://dailynous.com/2019/04/30/open-letter-regarding-president-bolsonaros-recent-pronouncements-defunding-philosophy-sociology/>. The address of the Brazilian embassy in your country can be found at <http://portalconsular.itamaraty.gov.br/representacoes-do-brasil-no-mundo>.

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