

Special Contribution

Structurally Unsafe - Thoughts on the University Today

Sonja DALE

Professor Petó's account of the harassment of gender studies faculty and the closure of university programs tells a harrowing tale of state control and the regulation of ideas and knowledge, and one that we have seen repeated throughout history and across cultures. However, in Professor Petó's account I also feel a strong sense of optimism—one that comes across in how her faculty responded, as well as the public support for the cause. The fact that political activism was considered “cool” was also something that I found encouraging in that it demonstrated how socially acceptable activism is and paints activism as an activity that individuals participate in, rather than shy away from.

Professor Petó mentions that these happenings taught her who her enemies and friends were, and it seems clear that there were friends in the university. I would like to consider today's theme by considering when this is not the case. That is to say, when the university is not your friend. The university today possesses different meanings in different social contexts, and the relevance that it has as a social institution certainly depends on the socio-economic context in which it is located. In many parts of the world, universities today are criticized for being neoliberal capitalist institutions that exploit non-tenured faculty and implement unhealthy work patterns for full-time faculty through the push for publications, that are concerned more with money than with student welfare or education, that create and reinforce hierarchical power structures which in turn lead to problems of harassment and violence on campus. Although universities have served and in some contexts continue to serve as crucial institutions for the creation and dissemination of thought,

knowledge and social critique, I would like to consider what happens when universities lose sight of this purpose. What happens when universities fail? What are the options for not only academic freedom, but also, the welfare of all of those involved in universities—faculty, staff, students—when universities are no longer able to ensure our safety? Focusing on issues pertaining to gender and sexuality and universities, I would like to consider and share an experience of the negligence of student welfare in order to consider the state of some universities in Japan and perhaps elsewhere, and then move on to consider alternative sources of academic freedom, or more aptly the production and dissemination of knowledge and ideas.

In recent years a spate of news stories has surfaced in Japan regarding sexual violence as well as discrimination on university campuses. There has been the shocking case of Tokyo Medical University, which admitted to intentionally limiting the number of female students admitted through rigging scores, demonstrating how universities can be corrupt social institutions that serve to maintain discrimination rather than reduce it. What was remarkable about this case was that many in academia also lamented that Tokyo Medical University was most likely not the only institution involved in such meddling. Some universities may not just be invested in keeping women out, but also foster a culture that serves to put women and minorities in a vulnerable position. There have been a number of cases of sexual violence against women made public recently, involving prestigious schools such as Chiba University and Keio University. The case of a Waseda University professor who sexually harassed a graduate student was also recently made public, and information released not only about the harassment, but also about how there was an active effort on campus to silence the student. Although hearing about these occurrences on campuses is disturbing and frustrating, we ought to laud the fact that they are being discussed at all, and need to recognize that there are many more cases which never make the light of day and remain hidden, sometimes actively so by the institutions implicated.

In 2015, a law school student from Hitotsubashi University, the university where I worked up until the end of May, committed suicide on campus. It emerged that the student had been outed as gay by a classmate of his. The parents of the student filed a lawsuit against the university in 2016, and it was only through watching the news that most of us at the university found out about this incident. I will not discuss the specifics of the case, but rather the overwhelming sense of indifference on campus that seemed to pervade afterwards. A colleague and I took to organizing lunch meetings as well as events on campus to ensure more queer visibility and discussion about diversity issues on campus. We were helped in our efforts by a wonderful group of students, many of whom said that they were unable to come out on campus and, also, did not feel safe. I have heard so many stories from students. A student who wanted to do research on LGBT issues was told that that was not an appropriate study for research. The professor sent the student articles about how being gay was a sickness after class (he also did the same for a student who said she wanted to do a presentation about feminism). Another gay student was at a dinner meeting with a professor who openly said that he thought gay people were disgusting. Students have shared experiences of homophobia and transphobia, misogyny, as well as racism on campus. There are so many problems that exist on campus, many of them propagated by university faculty. There are facilities on campus that are supposed to help solve these issues—a harassment consultation center, for example—but students who have had experience using these services say they don't change anything, while others believe from the outset that nothing will change and refrain from even using these services. Clearly, the system is not working as it is.

Despite the problems that pervade the university and the institutional structure that clearly is not functioning, there seems to be little interest in changing this and towards ensuring student welfare. Discussions focus on improving university rankings, but not much thought (nor action) is given to

the students and employees of universities and their quality of life. The current university system encourages a sort of selfishness; to ensure one's survival through publications and academic activities, and in so doing not having time for other issues.

Change can happen when people band together and work together, but when the majority of people are unwilling to move then perhaps that signifies an institution that one should instead move away from. I guess this is a dilemma for discussion: Is trying to change the university environment a worthwhile effort? Or, is it best for personal welfare to know when to walk away and perhaps seek to effect change through other means? I also wish to briefly bring up the issue of change and burden—in many cases, the people who act are those directly affected by a specific issue. Women, minorities. Being in a marginalized position is already a burden but being tasked with (or feeling the responsibility of) trying to bring about change can sometimes be too much to bear. How can we share the responsibility for social action?

Admittedly my experiences have left me a little critical of the university as an institution. Many academics do work on discrimination and social justice, yet fail to take action when something occurs in their own midst. How do you battle indifference?

And so, I would like to end my comments by thinking outside of the university. Today, knowledge has become more accessible than ever before, and the production and exchange of ideas has expanded beyond academic walls. Social media has become an invaluable resource, and events that bridge society and the university are increasing in number. I feel more optimism in thinking about the world outside of the university than about what is happening inside. Professor Petó's experiences were encouraging because of the support she had not only from within the university, but from the larger world as well. Indeed, thinking positively about these networks and how to initiate change together is something I would like to further consider with everyone today. I will end on this hopeful note!