Universities as breeding grounds for belief instead of knowledge

From Sacha Wigdorovits

Netflix is currently showing an entertaining series entitled “Nero”. It is about a professional killer and his daughter, who is said to be the last living descendant of the devil.

The story takes place in the south of France at the end of the Middle Ages. The key players include the “Büsser”: a group of fundamentalist and fanatical Catholics who believe that turning away from God is to blame for the drought and famine in the region. Over time, it emerges that this Büsser community was founded on the initiative of a power-hungry archbishop. But in the end, the Büssers have had enough of him too and throw him off the balcony of his cathedral without further ado.

The series is a reckoning with the Catholic Church. It is accused of appealing to the superstition of ordinary people in order to consolidate its own power and enforce its own policies with apocalyptic promises and brutal violence.

Unintentionally, “Nero” is thus also an allegory for the present day. Whereby the Catholic Church has been replaced by the universities. Today, they often no longer teach knowledge and sober thinking, as would actually be the task. Instead, faith and fanaticism are promoted for political reasons.

This is particularly the case in the humanities. And it takes place from Boston and New York to Zurich and Basel and, above all, Lausanne and Geneva.

This can be seen most clearly in connection with the war in Gaza, the Palestinians and the Jews (sorry: “Zionists”). Under the banner of post-colonialism, historical and current facts are replaced here by a factually unfounded creed that has sectarian traits.

As was the case with the groups of bushmen who wreaked havoc in many European countries between the 12th and 16th centuries, the same applies to these post-colonial students and some of their naturally left-wing professors: the Jews are to blame for our misery. Which is why they must be persecuted and expelled.

Just as the Catholic Church watched the Büsser’s activities for a long time – or even encouraged them – today’s university administrations often watch or actively support the activities of their students and certain professors for a long time.

The latter applies to the universities in Geneva and Lausanne – the two largest academic hotbeds of anti-Semitism in Switzerland. The university managements there cut off institutional cooperation with Israeli universities. Whether they did this out of fear of the fanatical student mob or out of their own conviction is irrelevant.

In English, the age in which women in Europe were burned as witches, alleged apostates were tortured and Jews were persecuted and killed is known as “the dark ages”. And it took a few hundred years before the age of enlightenment dawned after this dark epoch of superstition and blind fanaticism.

But even this “Age of Enlightenment” was not free of relapses into dark times. It is less than a hundred years since we experienced the barbaric terror and fanaticism of the National Socialists in Europe and the political “witch burnings” of the McCarthy era in the USA, to name just two examples.

Now we are about to turn the wheel back again in Europe and the USA, into another “dark age”. What is new is that this time it is not the church or politics that are playing a central role, but those institutions that, more than any others, should be promoting knowledge and humanism instead of fomenting (mis)belief and fanaticism: the universities.

Fortunately, this is not the case everywhere – or at least not to the same extent everywhere. For example, the two federally funded universities, ETH in Zurich and EPFL in Lausanne, have publicly declared that they will continue their cooperation with Israeli universities. The universities in Bern and Zurich also spoke out against a boycott of Israeli higher education institutions or researchers.

But where university management and professors give in to the pressure of their anti-Semitic and violent student body – or even actively support these groups – the local cantons should put a stop to these activities.

They have the means to do this in their own hands. For example, when subsidizing universities, cantonal parliaments can impose clear conditions regarding the management of the university, the requirements for teaching and research and the conduct of teaching staff and students.

This must include, in particular, that academic knowledge is taught without a political agenda (which is unfortunately no longer a matter of course) and that political actions that have nothing to do with the university itself are prohibited on

the university campus.

In addition, it must be clearly stated that violations of these provisions are a contractually stipulated reason for dismissal for teaching staff who fail to comply, result in the exclusion of the offending students from the university in question and lead to subsidy cuts by the canton.

This has nothing to do with restricting freedom of expression. The anti-Semitic rallies, the bullying of Jewish students and Jewish professors and the protests against cooperation with Israeli universities are not an expression of liberal freedom of expression. They are signs of a radical left-wing dictatorship of opinion that must be combated.

On the one hand, because the hatred and fanaticism that comes to light is not only directed against the Jews, but against our free and democratic society in general.

On the other hand, because universities have no right to exist if they are breeding grounds for fanaticism and misguided political creeds instead of mediators and incubators of knowledge, independent, rational thinking and ethics.

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