DOI: 10.24425/academiaPAS.2022.142696

When we say "Academy"...

Plato's Academy in a mosaic from Pompeii (first century CE)

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Will intellectual dignity and the ideal of knowledge ever lose their importance as values?

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The origins of the Academy founded by Plato are shrouded in trauma. The distinguished philosopher interrupted his stay in Sicily and came back to Athens. He was devastated: a return essentially meant a retreat. During his stay in Sicily, as a mentor to the ruler of Syracuse, Dionysius, Plato had attempted to pave the way for the reign of reason and virtue. His efforts were not exactly successful: he fell afoul of Dionysius and barely escaped with his life. Upon his return, he saw again the very thing he had escaped from – the misery of the city. Chaos, debauchery, senseless tussles. In the words of the translator of Plato's letters, Maria Maykowska, "In every manifestation of its life, Athens would show him evil and stupidity."[1] However, the Sicilian defeat did not dash all of Plato's hopes. He did not give up his dreams: he still wanted to change the world, albeit in a different way. That was how a grand project was born: the project of the Academy.

Antiquity

Plato "had his Academy recognized as a community consecrated to the worship of the Muses and Apollo, the head of the Muses."[2] The philosopher turned his gaze away from the absurdities of politics. He wanted to influence reality by shaping human minds and filling Athens with the radiance of truth. The Academy was intended as a refuge for the partisans of wisdom, those who desired to step outside the circle of illusion, beyond the conventions of the city intoxicated by the impetus of public opinion – genuine allies of the truth, those who wanted to see things as they really were.

The Academy rejected the rules of apparent wisdom and decided to rise above the noise of the street – in his pursuit of truth, Plato wanted to rely on unshakable foundations. By creating a community of rational knowledge, he also wanted to influence the future of the city. The model formed in this way would stand the test of time and become a symbol of values that represented the pinnacle of the world of knowledge.

Over time, the idea would obviously evolve, but the underlying thought would never lose its significance. That thought was indeed simple: to do good, one must shake the world out of its inertia, overcome the resistance of ignorance. That was how Plato saw things. Having adopted the creed of Socrates, he persisted in his conviction that the wisdom contained in authentic knowledge was always a manifestation of good.

Of course, not everything could assume the form of uninterrupted harmony – that was the case in the past, and this is the case now. In Athens, philosophers sometimes drew jeers, with the role of mentors to the crowd being played by Sophists, who – like Gorgias – argued that "there is no truth." Is the world capable of renouncing ignorance? Indeed, we should ask whether there is a *modus vivendi* that facilitates the coexistence of separate systems, one that allows the creed of the Academy to be reconciled with broader aspirations.

The Academy gave radiance to the idea of knowledge, and that may have been its most significant merit. It made demands, but it did not turn its back on the city: it cultivated the belief that authentic wisdom should go beyond the narrowly understood profession of truth. "[t]he ultimate aim of the Academy was not the pursuit of knowledge and science only in the abstract," as Giovanni Reale stresses, "but also their ethical and political applications in the concrete."[3]

It could be said that the Platonic Academy changed the direction of "the needle of the compass," thus guiding human ambitions out of the world of ignorance and into the world of knowledge. It also ultimately went beyond the narrow field of philosophy – as the Academy moved "[b]eyond the Socratic area of interest, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy made a triumphal entry. (…) We have, in addition, testimony that proves the presence in the Academy of medical men from Sicily."[4]

After all, the allies of reason aimed high – the cult of truth established in the Academy would mean the merger of the idea of knowledge with the pursuit of excellence. Interestingly, even now the concept of scientific excellence plays a prominent role in the language of the scholarly world. The idea of excellence retained its meaning: it became an element of secular eschatology, acting as a focus for the farthest-reaching hopes that were pinned on the advancement of knowledge and the pursuit of truth. The stakes were high. Shedding the burden of ignorance, as Socrates would teach, should initiate a transformation – an awakening ending the misery of life in a half-sleep, in a fever of delusions.

The Enlightenment

The Age of Enlightenment emphasized the *topos* of disillusionment, rooted in the philosophy of Plato, and construed the pursuit of rational knowledge as an act of purification – the beginning of regeneration. In tandem with the theme of disillusionment, the Enlightenment developed the symbolism of a new beginning – and brought forth its protagonist,

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[1] Maria Maykowska, introduction to Platon, *Listy* [Letters] (PWN, 1987).

[2] Giovanni Reale, *A History of Ancient Philosophy,* trans. John R. Catan, vol. 3 (SUNY, 1985).

[3] Reale, *A History of Ancient Philosophy.*

[4] Reale, *A History of Ancient Philosophy.*

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Henri Testelin, *Colbert Presenting the Members of the Royal Academy of Sciences to Louis XIV in 1667* (around 1680)

a New Adam. "The new man," as the enthusiasts envisioned him, "sees the entire future as a space of perfection."[5]

In keeping with this theme, in the seventeenth century, the academy archetype garnered renewed recognition and became imbued with great splendor. The year 1660 witnessed the establishment of a gathering of scholars in London, operating initially as an "invisible college," and from 1663 onwards officially as the Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge – in effect, the very first academy of sciences in modern history.

The year 1666, in turn, saw the establishment of a French academy of sciences (*Académie Royale des Sciences*). Gradually and in parallel, academies of arts, architecture, and music also came to be established in both countries. Royal patronage, as can be seen clearly in France's case, took the form of a Platonic parallel. Respectable bodies, infused with great prestige and dignity, were expected to foster the benefits of the advancement of scholarly knowledge and also to cultivate the principles of cultural refinement. The prestige of those scholarly bodies was linked to the symbolism of illumination. Louis XIV – *le Roi Soleil*, the Sun King – wanted his land to be awash with the radiance of wisdom. In seventeenth-century France, however, inspiration was already becoming coupled with calculation, as the emerging modernity was imposing its own laws. The first academies were set up by Jean-Baptiste Colbert, France's all-powerful Controller-General of Finances – a demiurge striding in the Sun King's entourage whilst carrying an accounting ledger under his arm. Academies would become a powerful force consolidating the secrets of wisdom, so as to shape the future of the monarchy and contribute to its glory, fortune, and fame.

However, the whole story begins even earlier: with a group of dreamers and visionaries whom we call the utopists. But let us not rush to treat them with a condescending sense of superiority. The works of the utopists may contain some deeper truth – a depiction of historical transfigurations that allow us to see the similarities between epochs and the durability of archetypes. It would be difficult to find a better example than Francis's Bacon *New Atlantis*, a work replete with intriguing themes. In it, the author successfully combined the cult of ancient wisdom with visionary panache and unwavering radicalism. The world can be, should be different! The descriptions in *New Atlantis* are filled with recurrent images of lost completeness. The greatest achievements of the ruler of this happy island include "the erection and institu-

[5] Mona Ozouf, "La Révolution française et l'idée de l'homme nouveau," in *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, vol. 2, ed. C. Lucas (Pergamon, 1988).

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The palace yard of Académie Royale des Sciences on a drawing by Sébastien Leclerc (1698)

tion of an Order or Society which we call Salomon's House."[6] From this moment on, knowledge would occupy the foreground, opening up the road to wisdom and happiness. The "*magnalia naturae*" ("wonders of nature") that the wise men of Salomon's House were meant to focus on ensuring include:

> "The prolongation of life.
> The restitution of youth in some degree.
> The retardation of age.
> The curing of diseases counted incurable."[7]

That was how the precursors of modernity envisioned the future.

Tommaso Campanella was guided by a similar vision when sketching out his picture of *The City of the Sun*. The marvelously symmetrical squares and streets of Campanella's dream city were meant to become a paragon of perfection – an inscription of reason that illustrated the nature of the perfect society, which was the embodiment of rationality (architecture participated in the *mysterium* of truth). The City of the Sun was ruled by the servants of reason – this was what life there was like. "Wisdom is the ruler of the liberal arts, of mechanics, of all sciences with their magistrates and doctors, and of the discipline of the schools."[8] This fanciful city was the picture of an academy becoming the whole world – the most ambitious and far-going transposition of Plato's model.

Campanella's images anticipated the direction of great historical change. The *imaginarium* of the Enlightenment was a replica of Plato's solar symbolism. The image of light coming from above, dispelling the darkness of ignorance, ultimately became one of the key aspects of the founding myth of modernity. Encoded within these "metaphorics of illumination" were all the hopes of modern rationalism.[9]

In the Enlightenment, attempts were made to institutionalize Plato's idea of the rule of reason, transforming the *topos* of an Academy into an array of practices. The eighteenth century became the century of academies of sciences. The academy idea appeared dressed in new, ornamental garb, bequeathed by enlightened monarchs. Enlightened despotism (*le despotisme éclairé*) was a major trend in the Enlightenment-era traditions. Russia, Prussia, and Austria, all of which were absolute monarchies, supported this credo of the eighteenth century. To them we owe the grand resurgence of the academy concept. The "great" rulers of these countries – Peter the Great, Frederick the Great, and Catherine the Great – rolled up their sleeves and got down to work, flirting with philoso-

[6] Francis Bacon, William Rawley, George Fabyan Collection, *Sylva sylvarum, or, A natural history in ten centuries […] and the New Atlantis* (Printed for Bennet Griffin, 1683)

[7] Bacon, Rawley, and Fabyan, *Sylva sylvarum*

[8] Tommaso Campanella, *City of the Sun,* trans. Thomas W. Halliday, in *Ideal Commonwealths*, ed. H. Morley, fifth edition (Routledge, 1890)

[9] Marek J. Siemek, *Wykłady z filozofii nowoczesności* [Lectures on the philosophy of modernity] (PWN, 2012).

phers, eager to try their hand at combatting the power of ignorance.[10] They would become what we now call trendsetters, influencers shaping the fate of societies – as academies of science were established in all three countries. Impassioned democrats, we should note, did not always share the same sympathies: in 1793, on the very threshold of the Reign of Terror, France's Jacobins abolished the French Academy of Sciences.

Did they have any reason to do so, apart from overzealousness, which is encouraged by every revolution? There may have been some perverse intuition in all this, some measure of mistrust of the haughty loftiness of majesty, which would prove unacceptable in the age of democracy. The Jacobins opened up a chapter, and it has yet to be closed. As we know, loftiness often borders on the ridiculous. The grand ambitions of the Age of Reason were mercilessly mocked by Jonathan Swift in *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World*, or the famous *Gulliver's Travels*. In the book, we find a mocking picture of the Grand Academy of Lagado. Among "[t]he arts wherein the professors employ themselves," Swift lists the task of "extracting sunbeams out of cucumbers," efforts to "calcine ice into gunpowder," and studies into the "malleability of fire."[11]

> No universally recognized measures of truth exist any longer. If so, what could the sense of the concept of scientific knowledge be?

In closing our ledger of mockery and catalog of examples, we should stress that the democrats likewise did not overlook the historical conjuncture conducive to the success of academies of sciences. In Boston in 1780, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences was founded by a man from the generation of the great Founding Fathers – John Adams. This came four years after the Declaration of Independence, in the heyday of the American Revolution, which sought to reaffirm its own hopes. The Academy of Sciences was founded even before the Constitution of the United States was enacted. The need to consolidate institutions of knowledge was given recognition before the need for political consolidation. In fact, everything started even earlier. The groundwork for the Academy was laid by an associative movement – which was, of course, the point of democratic initiatives. In 1743, the American Philosophical Society had been founded by Benjamin Franklin – with the concept of philosophy being understood in a very broad sense. The Society was expected to support "all philosophical Experiments that let Light into the Nature of Things," taking into account, for example, "new-discovered Plants, Herbs, Trees, Roots," or caring for "New Methods of Curing or Preventing Diseases."[12] That was the true mission of philosophers: to promote wisdom that would influence human life. In their innovative nature, the American views on philosophy anticipated the direction that would become in a sense the signature of practical wisdom and would ultimately shape the ambitions related to the advancement of knowledge in all democratic societies – pragmatism. That meant the rejection of the Platonic model, with new hopes but also new worries being born on those foundations.

The contemporary era

Rules of rationality, as we know so very well, are undergoing transformations. Thinking means a constant flow of ideas, a constant search. It would now be difficult to imitate the eighteenth century and talk about the "reign of reason." We no longer use that language; we certainly see things differently. "We must part," as the Polish philosopher Marek J. Siemek wrote, "with the hopes of grasping all meaning, regardless of how it is understood."[13] No universally recognized measures of truth exist any longer. If so, what could the sense of the concept of scientific knowledge be? If we come to terms with the thought that "the idea of ultimate validation is a myth," then only "non-absolute, fragmentary validations" will be possible.[14] In the culture of divided opinions, the idea of a hierarchical order, associated with the symbolism of illumination and rooted in images of reason reaching us from the heights of light, loses its meaning. Could science survive the demise of the concepts of knowledge formed in keeping with the tradition of the Enlightenment? Will the culture of fragments accommodate institutions that cultivate the mission of reason? Will respect for the patina-covered statue of Solomon's House survive, or will it turn out that its splendor is gone?

In addition, new temptations are emerging. It is hard to overlook the efforts to transform Solomon's House into a chamber of commerce and industry. We can see the growing importance of the tensions between the principle of autonomy, which shapes the aspirations of scientific reason, and the claims of the "knowledge industry" – between the ethos of truth and the criteria of efficiency based on the principle of utility. We must bear in mind that untruth may sometimes bring greater benefits than truth. Can we trust the criteria of utility without any reservations? Do we want to definitively reject the Platonic models of wisdom and demolish the sanctuaries of knowledge by replacing them with the operating systems

[10] François Bluche, *Le despotisme éclairé* (Fayard, 1968).

[11] Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World* (Project Gutenberg, 1997), https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/829

[12] The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, vol. 2, ed. Leonard W. Labaree (Yale, 1961), cited from Founders Online, National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-02-02-0092

[13] Siemek, *Wykłady*

[14] Siemek, *Wykłady*

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Rafael Santi, *The School of Athens* (1509–1511)

of artificial intelligence? The classical order, which took into account the primacy of truth, assumed that what was true was also effective. Towards the end of modernity, this order came to be reversed: what was effective was also considered to be true.[15]

Needless to say, we do not have good answers to all difficult questions. The search for certainty should prompt us to keep trusting science as the supreme form of knowledge. However, there will be plenty of skeptics, egalitarians, and enthusiasts of wisdom based on popularity ratings.

Can we rescue the prestige of knowledge whilst rejecting the Enlightenment-age symbolism of illumination? This question in its essence captures a great contradiction that we can no longer hide – the emancipation of reason has ultimately nullified its authority. Jacques Derrida, one of the protagonists of deconstruction, a philosophical trend in which the most radical criticism of the pathos of knowledge is now taking shape, argues that the "search for truth without any conditions attached"[16] still retains its significance – in fact, this is the sense of all deconstruction programs, which are always aimed at overcoming illusion.

The dignity of thinking and the ideal of knowledge alone may never lose their significance as values. Those in the know will say that this is the power of the original sin, these are the consequences of reaching for the fruits from the tree of knowledge. The desire for knowledge is insatiable, so the foundations of Solomon's House will not be destroyed by any furies.

Where are we, ultimately? Does the idea of a "knowledge society" not remind us a little of the dreams of Campanella, who sketched out the vision of a City of the Sun? With our Promethean emotionality and desire for immortality, can we renounce the splendors of Solomon's House? Where do we, immortal wanderers in the kingdom of unfulfilled hopes, want to go?

Let us leave aside these unbearable questions. One thing is certain: just as in Plato's times, we still have a lot of work to do, plenty of things to worry about. The hustle and bustle of the city, the disorder, the tussles of the sophists. We know this atmosphere, we know this mood. In our smog-shrouded "Athens," the scales have yet to tip in anyone's favor. The cosmopolis is choking, it does not fall asleep. We continue to grapple with the force of inertia, which encourages tendencies leading us to the verge of a disaster. Today, as we know, our doom may take the form of a climate catastrophe. In defiance of all sciences, ignorance and bad habits are raging unabated. And the temperature is rising.

But is there anything that sets us apart from the Greeks? Let us answer without hesitation: yes, there is. We do not have to found an Academy – it already exists. ■

[15] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota, 1984)

[16] Jacques Derrida, *Learning To Live Finally: The Last Interview*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault & Michael Naas (Melville, 2007)