

## The Role of Academies in the 21st Century: Knowledge in the Age of Relativism

Otto Federico von Feigenblatt <sup>1</sup>  
*Keiser University*  
*United States of America*

### Abstract

The present paper presents a brief overview of the development of academies and how their role has evolved during the centuries. At the core of the mission of academies one can find the concept of "knowledge" and its "diffusion". A brief discussion about the importance of knowledge in the age of data and information is provided so as to explain the pivotal function of Academies vis a vis university, the media, and governments. A final section discusses the challenges and opportunities faced by academies in an age characterized by extreme relativism and virulent populism.

**Keywords:** Academies, knowledge, Age of Enlightenment, Relativism

### Introduction

Academies are institutions surrounded by an aura of mystery. Learned societies with their origin in the Age of Enlightenment and inspired by the love of knowledge of Ancient Greece, academies are considered to be the pinnacle of knowledge. Nevertheless, Academies are not without their critics who in many cases consider them to be outdated, elitist, and lacking in terms of a clear purpose and function in a modern society (CATAÑO, 2018). Moreover, the relationship between academies and power structures has received considerable attention from critical voices partly as a result of the postmodern turn in the humanities and the social sciences (CATAÑO, 2018; Villarreal, 2014).

A good starting point for a discussion on academies is a brief overview of its most well-known exponent, the Royal Academy of Language of Spain. Known by millions of Spanish speakers as the organizations overseeing the publication of the official dictionary, the institution is much more than just a publisher of the venerable dictionary. Membership in the

---

<sup>1</sup> vonfeigenblatt@hotmail.com  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6033-6495>

academy is considered to be the pinnacle of the academic ladder in the field of Spanish literature. Some of the most important lights of Spanish literature have been members of the venerable institution. The Royal Academy of Language is also known because of its role in the controversy over the so called “inclusive language” (CATAÑO, 2018). People, who had never heard about the institution before, found out that there is an organization with considerable influence about what constitutes proper Spanish orthography and grammar.

The institution’s rejection of inclusive language further antagonized opponents of its perceived elitism and lack of popular representation. We will return to the issue of representation and inclusiveness in later sections of this essay but for now it will suffice to mention that academies were never meant to serve as democratic bodies but rather to represent the highest level of accomplishment and mastery found in a particular country or region. Thus, the principle of equality was never part of the equation.

It should be noted that Academies as institutions were never directly identified with a particular political system. Communist countries, liberal democracies, monarchies, and even dictatorships have supported a vast array of academies. A well-known example of socialist support for academies was in the Soviet Union. The People’s Republic of China has also provided considerable support for academies in several fields, with the visible example of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Therefore, it is clear that the central importance of knowledge as a catalyst for growth and stability transcended ideological borders.

The historical role of academies in fostering the dissemination of knowledge is well documented and thus only a brief overview of their role will be provided. On the other hand, the current role of academies in an era characterized by extreme relativism and populism is the focus of the present exploratory essay.

### **Brief historical sketch of some of the most notable academies**

The French Academy is considered to be the oldest of the modern national academies (Academie francaise, 2022). Established by Cardinal Richelieu in 1635, it is tasked with the protection of the French language. Its membership is composed of 40 elected academicians who hold their posts for life. Members are informally known as the “immortals” and are entitled to wear a green uniform as a sign of their status. The French Academy publishes the official dictionary of the French language and has formal authority over grammar and spelling. It is important to note that it receives funding from the French government and it enjoys almost universal respect as the highest exponent of the French language and literature.

Following closely in terms of prestige and influence, one can find the Royal Academy of Language of Spain. Established at the height of the Enlightenment with the support of King

Phillip V in 1713, the Academy closely resembles the mission and function of the French Academy but with a focus on the Spanish Language ("Real Academia Española," 2022). The Royal Academy of Language publishes the official dictionary for the Spanish Language and it is composed of 46 numbered academicians who serve for life. Members include several Nobel Prize winners and it publishes the official dictionary for the Spanish language. Membership in the academy is considered one of the highest possible honors in Spain and the organization wields considerable cultural power as evidence by its role in the "inclusive language" controversy.

A historical account of notable academies would not be complete without mentioning the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union (Roberts, 1997). The Academy was established in 1925 and it had a two-level membership system. It was the highest scientific institution and it included the leading minds of the country. The Academy was composed of 323 full academicians and 586 corresponding ones. In 1991 the Academy was restructured as the Russian Academy of Sciences with a very similar structure. It should be noted that the Academy of Sciences enjoyed great prestige even outside of the Soviet sphere of influence. This was particularly the case in the hard sciences.

The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences was established in 1977 by the People's Republic of China ("Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS),"). It includes a wide array of disciplines and receives generous support from the government. CASS includes more than three thousand members and it produces original research and provides guidance to both the public and the government on a diverse range of issues. It is one of the most well-funded and professionally staffed academies in the world and it is known for its prolific number of publications and massive academic conferences.

Another notable development is the proliferation of private/non-governmental academies in Western Europe and the Americas such as regional Academies in Europe and subnational academies in Latin America. The range of topics and disciplines included is broad and very diverse. Thus, it seems that academies as institutions are thriving in a wide array of contexts. The next section focuses on the challenges faced by academies in the early 21st century.

### **Postmodernism, the Information Society, and Populism**

Even though some national academies are thriving and there is a plethora of regional and local academies, there is a concurrent trend of diminished public trust and an increase in skepticism about the role of intellectuals in the public sphere. Anti-intellectualism is not new and rather follows the cyclical nature of history. Nevertheless, postmodernism and to a certain extent post-structuralism followed by relativism in Anthropology, slowly eroded some of the pillars of science (Faubion, 2007; Otto F. von Feigenblatt, 2009; Murdock, 1955; Napier, 2001; Pieterse, 2007). Initially, restricted to the intelligentsia itself, the doubts and

challenges posited by proponents of postmodernism and relativism simply resulted in the inclusion of a wider range of perspectives and voices and to a much-needed self-reflection about the academic endeavor and the creation of knowledge. Nevertheless, as usually happens when a theory breaches the gates of academia and becomes part of public discourse, theory transforms into ideology. Thus, the principles and points of contention of sophisticated academic debates are oversimplified into cheap talking points weaponized in favor of one political agenda or another.

The challenge to academic authority is further strengthened by virtually universal access to data and information through the internet (HSIN-HUANG, HSIAO, & WAN, 2007). Differentiating between data, information, and knowledge can be challenging even for graduate students, and expecting the general public to be able to discern the differences is unrealistic in an era of relativism and pseudo-empowerment. Thus, the paradox is that in the "information society" access to knowledge is actually diminishing. The false sense of certainty and understanding brought about by immediate access to thousands of web pages on an unlimited range of subjects gives the impression of universal and unmediated access to knowledge and wisdom.

Another layer can also be added to the challenge to the pillars of academia and to the very core of academic authority, the resurgence of populism on both the left and the right (Otto Federico von Feigenblatt, Pardo, & Cooper, 2021; Murphy, 2009). Populism is an ideology favoring jingoism and simplistic solutions for complex problems. Appeals for support are made directly to the "people", in the supposed pursuit for liberation from the constraints of bureaucratic intellectualism. It is an appeal to atavistic urges for unrestrained freedom to err. According to populists, truth is determined by numbers of adherents and by "common sense" (Otto Federico von Feigenblatt et al., 2021). This "common sense" is usually focused on a few simplistic talking points borrowed from distorted versions of a convenience sample of theories.

The combination of the postmodern turn, with the rise of the so-called "information society", and the resurgence of populism present a concerted attack on the authority of academies. Academies have as their main function the dissemination of knowledge as represented by the most outstanding exponents of the academic establishment. National academies serve as the highest academic tribunal for their countries and thus provide guidance on topics dealing with their disciplines. The example of the controversy over inclusive language is a recent example of the central role that academies can potentially play in policy debates. Timely and decisive action by the Royal Academy of Language stopped the spread of inclusive language before it could take hold (Villarreal, 2014). The immense authority of the Royal Academy and its strong argument based on internal logic of the language proved to be a decisive factor. Moreover, the composition of the Academy includes a vast array of political backgrounds and academicians are chosen based on their academic

accomplishments rather than based on ideological grounds. With the possible exemption of the French Republic, the People's Republic of China, inter alia, the media has also shifted its attention to less qualified pundits as pseudo-experts on a range of experts ranging from COVID to international relations. Actors, athletes, and artists are morphed by the media into all-knowing sages about a gamut of issues.

Academies continue to exist and some have expanded their functions to serve as veritable think tanks; however, their isolation from the wider public sphere seems to be increasing. The encapsulation of the highest exponents of the arts, letters, and sciences and their replacement in the public sphere with the empty words of populists, demagogues, and empty influences, does not bode well for society in the early 21st century.

## Conclusion

Can we ignore the veil of darkness that is engulfing the public sphere? Should academicians retreat to their ivory towers or should they take the public stand in the defense of knowledge and civilization. Is it possible to remain neutral in this war over the meaning and source of knowledge? Those are some of the questions that come to mind when thinking about academies in the 21st century.

Without taking a postmodern stand on the issue, there are clearly many possible actions that can be taken to ameliorate or even roll back the current descend into academic chaos. The first recommended course of action would be to advocate for the respect of academic authority. Another possible action is to participate in a wider range of activities dealing with the dissemination of knowledge. The majority of the population does not read academic journals and does not attend academic conferences and thus it is important to engage the public creatively and proactively. An important step is also to collaborate with primary and secondary schools to engage the younger generations from an early stage so as to foster their respect for academic authority and knowledge. The final recommendation is to withstand the onslaught of criticism coming from both the ideological left and right. Resistance begins with the defense of educated dialogue and reason.

Academies as institutions have withstood the passage of time, revolutions, counter revolutions, and all types of upheavals. Therefore, it is safe to predict that academies will continue to serve an important role in the 21st century, as the protectors and exponents of the highest accomplishment in the many disciplines encompassing the eternal search for knowledge and wisdom.

## References

- Academie francaise. (2022). Retrieved from <https://www.academie-francaise.fr/>
- Cataño, A. (2018). The RAE Has Made Its Decision About Latinx and Latine in Its First Style Manual. REMEZCLA, (November 28).
- Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). Retrieved from <http://casseng.cssn.cn/>
- Faubion, J. D. (2007). Currents of Cultural Fieldwork. In P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland, & L. Lofland (Eds.), *Handbook of Ethnography* (Paperback ed., pp. 39-59). London: SAGE Publications.
- Feigenblatt, O. F. v. (2009). Disciplinary "Moratorium": Post-Colonial Studies, Third Wave Feminism, and Development Studies. *Revista Vivat Academica*, 11(108), 1-5.
- Feigenblatt, O. F. v., Pardo, P., & Cooper, M. (2021). Corporatism and Benevolent Authoritarianism: Viable Antidotes to Populism. *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences*, 11, 95-98.
- HSIN-HUANG, HSIAO, M., & WAN, P.-S. (2007). The Experiences of Cultural Globalizations in Asia-Pacific. *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, 8(3), 361-376.
- Murdock, G. (1955). Cultural Relativity. *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 11, 361-370.
- Murphy, C. (2009). Populism Erodes Thailand's Old Order. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 172(5), 7-12.
- Napier, S. J. (2001). Confronting Master Narratives: History As Vision in Miyazaki Hayao's Cinema of De-assurance. *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, 9(2), 467-493.
- Pieterse, J. N. (2007). *Ethnicities and Global Multiculture: Pants for an Octopus* (Hardcover ed.). Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Real Academia Espanola. (2022). Retrieved from <https://www.rae.es/>
- Roberts, J. M. (1997). *The Penguin History of Europe* (Paperback ed.). London: Penguin Books.
- Villarreal, A. (2014, November 11). Reales Academias: una renovacion urgente y necesaria para el siglo XXI. *Diario ABC*.