"INTERESTING JOURNALISM HAPPENS WHEN JOURNALISTS TRY OUT NEW IDEAS, TRY OUT NEW WAYS OF REPRESENTING THE ECONOMY, AND ARE NOT INTIMIDATED BY THE AUTHORITY OF ESTABLISHED EXPERTISE" AN INTERVIEW WITH TIAGO MATA

Tomás UNDURRAGA [*]

Interview context

This interview took place on May 21, 2025, and explores Tiago Mata's approach of studying public economic debate from a science studies perspective.

Interviewee Profile

Tiago Mata is Professor at the Department of Science and Technology Studies, University College London. Tomás Undurraga is Professor and Head of the Sociology Department, Universidad Alberto Hurtado, Chile. They worked together between 2012 and 2016 in a European Research Council funded project entitled "*Economics in the Public Sphere: UK, US, France, Brazil, and Argentina since 1945"* – where Tiago was Principal Investigator, and Tomás a post-doctoral researcher studying Brazilian media.

Tomás Undurraga: *You are a historian of economics with a background in science and technology studies—a novel and compelling combination. As a way of introduction, could you tell us about your academic background, your initial intellectual curiosities, and how you came to focus on this interdisciplinary approach?*

Maybe a good place to start is Portugal and my 1st degree, which was not in history. So, for various personal reasons that are not worth getting into, I was

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going to study economics, but I had a choice. There are several schools or faculties in economics in Lisbon, where I'm from. And at that time there were basically two options, two schools. One was an older faculty of economics, and the other more recent, literally called "Universidade Nova". As is common to economics teaching in most of Continental Europe, the faculties develop strong party-political identities. So, one was left and center left, located overlooking the national Parliament, the other school was right and center right and not far away from a famous prison. I leave you to guess which one I picked… This happened before the Bologna homogenization of degrees in Europe. The degree was not only more left leaning, it was also disciplinarily diverse: I did a bit of finance, lots of macro, micro, econometrics, but we also studied sociology, economic history, development, history of ideas and philosophy. And in my very final year I took a class in the history of economics and it was then, reading about the scholars behind the ideas that some of what I had learnt began to make sense. Finally, here was an approach that matched how my brain worked. You know, framing theories in social context in various ways. Not just the biographical context but also backgrounds of the social and economic structures of the time. It just felt right, it was more interesting too. Concepts gained a body, a weight, that they didn't have when they were explained to me formally or empirically. From there I followed with a master's in economics at Cambridge. I had been told it was a heterodox place, which turned out to be false advertising. Immediately after that I had the opportunity to fund a PhD. degree. There were then very generous grants for Portuguese to go study abroad and I chose - at the advice of one of my teachers in Lisbon who happened to also be the leader of a major left-wing party - he suggested I go to the London School of Economics (LSE) to work with Mary Morgan on a project in the history of economics.

Mary Morgan has always been an historian with numerous intellectual connections, notably with philosophers of science. It was through her that I became aware of science studies and the sociology of science. One day, during a supervision, she handed me a print out of Thomas Gieryn (1995) essay on boundary work. It was a brilliant suggestion, it fit like a glove to do the kinds of things I wanted to do. I wanted to study the ideas of the people that I had some affinity with. Again, progressive, heterodox economists, which was what I knew, making sense (for myself) of where those ideas were coming from and what they were doing. The sociology of science became a kind of scaffolding to organize and justify that interest and analysis.

And you know, the work will change the worker. Sociology became less of a scaffold and more of a portal that I had walked through. The more I asked questions about credibility and power, the less the economics was interesting and the more interesting was everything else. In time, the background became the foreground. The subjects that for conventional historians of economics were context to the text increasingly became the story for me.

Tomás Undurraga: *That's fascinating. So, the centrality of the context became the protagonist of the story that you wanted to tell. And what were your next steps, institutionally speaking. Did you go to the USA for a postdoc? Did you go first to the Netherlands?*

After the degree at the LSE, I had a very brief postdoc at STS, University College London, where I am now, working with a terrific scholar called Jane Gregory. She was writing on dissent in natural science and had just published a book on a controversial British astronomer, Fred Hoyle. She was interested in unconventional scientists not primarily because of their unusual ideas but because of how they reached out to the mass public. It was through her that I got interested in media and the communication of ideas as creative moments. When time came to write a postdoc project, I used what I had learned in those very intense eight months at UCL. That became my first postdoc at Duke University. I eventually interrupted that postdoc because I got a teaching job at Amsterdam, and it was in Amsterdam that I expanded those ideas to a European Research Council proposal that was no longer focused on how economists' communicate - as I had started doing at UCL and continued at Duke - but rather focused on journalists. That was the crucial twist. Laying this out to you makes it clear to me how much these were all tentative steps, from working on unusual economists, getting interested in the way they communicated beyond peer groups, and finally turning to journalists' practices. All the while what was once context became the subject. There were no big leaps in the dark. All very grounded and all of it encouraged by the disciplinary hybridity that is science and technology studies.

Tomás Undurraga: *This helps to understand better the evolution of your research, from looking at economists to looking at journalists, and from looking at the background context of phenomena to making that background the foreground of your research. I would like to ask you a bit more about your work on the radical economics and the resurgence of the left in North America during the 1960s and 1970s. You explored how they introduced new ways of thinking about the economy, expertise, and social justice. How do you explain the rise of economists as public experts?*

So, that work has been twenty years in the making, and the book will be launched next year (MATA, 2026). It started with my PhD – which is accessible through the LSE website, titled "Dissent in Economics." It was a study of why economists disagree. It focused on this internalist problem of how a discipline that seemed in the mid twentieth century to be cohesive and homogeneous, began to splinter into antagonistic, doctrinal positions from the middle 1960s. So, it's

very much dealing with a problem in the history of social science. I studied two communities, post Keynesians and radical economists, wondering how each came to identify as distinct from the neoclassical mainstream that trained them. What was the basis of their critique? How did they structure themselves intellectually and as a social group? This is where the device of boundary work was useful because it gave me license to look at a crisis of credibility within the discipline of economics and yet not limit myself to the discipline, and also bring into the picture the external stakeholders and constituencies that economists were appealing to – i.e. student movements, social justice movements, policymakers, etc. Luckily, the two groups I picked turned out to be very different. One was rooted to a tradition within economics, Post-keynesians were reclaiming a Cambridge tradition that joined J.M. Keynes and Alfred Marshall. They modelled themselves as being elite, policy-oriented and worldly. By contrast, the radical economist's identity was tied up with New Left counterculture and activist science for mass mobilization. Very different ethos, even though they agreed on a lot of doctrinal specifics. The dissertation was really about working from these contrasts and was focused on the early years of both of these groups and their moves of differentiation and demarcation. But then I started writing a book, which was initially going to be the dissertation with a few added bells and whistles. Over the years because the book has lived in a symbiotic and at times parasitic relationship with all these other projects I've done, it became about something else. It became solely about radical economists and it became about the place of knowledge in helping to animate and direct grassroots, socialist politics in the US. So, I've gone from telling a story of how scholars coalesce in the discipline to filling out a longer and broader story of how these same economists gave up on trying to change their discipline and spent their time doing summer schools for activists, writing pamphlets, developing genres of citizen journalism, feeding their expertise into alternative pro-labor and pro-feminist think tanks. To get back to your question, the book became a story about leftwing economic expertise. It doesn't fully abandon the idea that economists have important answers, but holds that their expert input must stand in relation to the demands of participatory democracy.

Tomás Undurraga: *It's interesting seeing how these two different ways of influencing politics – one more technocratic and one more grassroots based – have been in tension in center left politics during the last 50 years. Thinking in the Chilean case, however, in which economists in the public sphere enjoys great prestige as public experts, the technocratic approach has certainly greater presence than the grassroots movement. Although there are few activist economists from the left with public presence, the technocratic blend of top down, policymakers oriented is the norm.*

Perhaps not in Chile but I think the grassroots approach is not so unusual, of course the institutional structures of North America matter. The preponderance of think tanks is, for instance, a big element here. Very few countries rely on such a variety of well sourced non-governmental research organizations to carry out policy analysis and debate as does the United States. For instance, in Portugal there is a more hierarchical or elitist character to the economic discipline, and the public sector is important in the provision of expertise, the rules of access to the public sphere and how to play out the combat of ideas are necessarily different. Interestingly, as a peripheral nation there are attempts to import the USA model of a progressive think tank, in particular one institution called the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) in Washington, DC. The EPI was funded initially by the AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations) and the UAW (United Automobile Workers), the unions, and it has roots in radical economics. It has roots in my story of dissenters and it was mostly irrelevant for decades and decades, and then it became very, very salient in the last 20 years. A lot of the people associated with EPI were involved in the Biden administration, so suddenly, for the first time ever they were on that side of Washington. Countries will imitate these US forms and strategies, these think tanks, but the effects are never the same.

Tomás Undurraga: *Let's talk about the Economics in the Public Sphere project. Between 2012 and 2016, you led a major European Research Council project entitled Economics in the Public Sphere, the UK, US Brazil and Argentina since 1945, in which I had the opportunity to work with you. Could you tell what was this project about and what's its main findings?*

Now it should be easy to see how this project fit in. All the while I was on this journey from economics into this space, which someone close to me described as "a place for misfits". Science studies is a place for misfits, for people working in interstitial spaces or who are disciplinary non-conformists.

So, what was the Econpublic project about? The project was about looking at the role of journalists in the making of the public economic sphere. I often heard that journalists were despised by economists, and this didn't feel right, given what I had seen of frequent partnerships between media professionals and economists. Looking at STS literature, I also thought if scientists in public produce knowledge why not treat journalists as knowledge producers? If one subscribes to the STS principle of symmetry - David Bloor, Barry Barnes and the Strong Program in Sociology of Knowledge, Michael Callon and the sociology of translation - in which knowledge making is not only the domain of acclaimed scientists, questions about knowledge become much more interesting. Sure, laboratories are privileged sites of scientific knowledge production, but production of knowledge doesn't stop at their doors.

What would happen if we set aside the twin prejudice that journalism is either about heroic "speaking truth to power" or its reverse, corrupted venality? Aren't journalists in the business of making sense and interrogating economy and society?

It began with this possibility, this symmetric deduction. I designed the project as a study of that idea, looking for instances where we could study journalists breaking new ground, systematizing, adopting and adapting social science. And all the while I used the idioms of STS to make sense of it all.

The other features of that project that you know well – the comparison between the public debates in different nations – the US, the UK, France, Brazil, and Argentina – and the role of journalistic genres in those debates, were partly artifacts of the funding system. I knew there was a certain preference at the European Research Council for comparative approaches, so I thought about which countries I could work with that also provided me leverage on the issues I wanted to examine. Issues like the status of economics as profession. I wanted some variability about the makeup of the media sphere. One gets a sense of the size of the sandbox. What is the type of sand you have to play with. What are the requisite tools. The challenge is to come up with something coherent, and that's what I tried to do.

But the heart of it was always this intuition that we could look at journalism through an STS lens, not as channeling of economic science and whether the public buys it or not, but a strong thesis, to study the journalist herself as doing something that is not that different from credentialed social and economic knowledge.

Tomás Undurraga: *Well, the original project included Poland instead of Argentina, as one of the cases, because of the strong social movements' role in the public economic discussion. Considering the unique story in each of these countries, what do you think was most interesting to understand about country differences, and what do they have in common?*

Perhaps you can answer this question as well, because I don't have a particularly privileged insight on it. We saw the same things, we worked with the same material. I thought that we came to realize that the status of the economics profession across nations was not very relevant. Once we got close to the journalists and what they were doing, the features of the journalism field, and the media spheres were more germane to the problem, which is hardly surprising.

We also encountered a pull towards universalism or homogeneity on financial and business news. There a sort of emulation across borders. It's a very internationalized field. Some of that initial national presumption had to be framed by this process of imitation or modelling. The eminence of *The Economist* was everywhere, although more so in middle twentieth century than in more recent years. Everyone knew about *The Economist* and positioned itself to it. They always understood it slightly

differently, and there was also the *Financial Times* or *The Wall Street Journal* in the picture. There were a few, very obvious, points of reference for many journalists. I was also impressed by what you brought to the project: the way that journalists were constructing markets in constant conversations with the marketplace. When I read the work on the sociology of quantification or the social studies of finance, I am reminded that there are always journalists in those stories too, providing part of the information infrastructure that underpins markets and creates value. Very clearly journalists are part of the games played with numbers that then make the economy run.

Tomás Undurraga: *One of the most fascinating findings from my empirical research in Brazil—and also in Argentina and Chile—was recognizing the differing levels of reputation and scientific status attributed to economists compared to journalists. Journalists were generally perceived as occupying a less empowered position vis-à-vis economists. Yet, despite this imbalance, both groups depend on each other (Undurraga, 2018). What particularly struck me was the boundary work that economists do in order to maintain the exclusivity of their professional jurisdiction. Economists often assert themselves as the sole legitimate experts capable of addressing economic issues. This boundary work was remarkably effective in delineating who is—and who is not—authorized to participate in public economic debate. It reinforced the dominance of technical expertise while largely excluding more critical or alternative voices from entering that space.*

That is a powerful analysis of some of Latin American public economic spheres, but we should be cautious to generalize. It's not as salient in the US or in Britain. One quick way to make sense of those differences would be to note less of a reliance on cultural capital in favor of social capital. The social capital among UK and US journalists is such that there isn't an obvious deference for the specialist professor. I don't feel that journalists are intimidated or deferential towards sources just because they are a professor at Harvard or the like. They are also not antagonistic or confrontational. Some of these journalists are elites in their own right, with degrees from the Ivy League Universities, if not in economics then in the humanities. So, I think they're not easily awed, and they are very self-confident. We saw this clearly in the testimonies that we collected in a recent edited volume *Economics as News* (Mata, 2023). The statements from journalists were very similar, saying: "I'm an imposter, but I'm okay with it," they even seemed proud of it. They have to interpret what economists say and tell a story, which is what an economist might do, because that's what the newspaper or the news outlet expects them to do. They need to interpret events, read markets and explain policy options, without a degree in economics. They learn to do it and are happy doing it. So, they are not weighted down by this caution or taboo of not impersonating the expert.

Tomás Undurraga: *Let's talk of this idea of studying the newsroom as a knowledge site. Taking the inspiration from Latour's laboratory studies (Latour & Woolgar, 1979), who argues that scientific facts are not simply discovered, but are also socially constructed through practices, through negotiations, through materialities, in the Econpublic project we studied the newsrooms from that perspective.*

It has been very special the reception to that side of the research. Every time I've presented this work there's been sympathy towards the stress on practices. Partly, because I've presented it to audiences where journalism is not often a theme or object of inquiry, I've never presented at a communication studies conference. Well, actually, I did present some of the work at the Columbia School of Journalism, and I was graced by a very distinguished audience– including Herbert J. Gans who passed away last month. For those who believe in the value of ethnographic work in newsrooms, I think our approach feels very plausible.

I think one issue has been that we really haven't had much to say to journalists who are facing in real time an onslaught on their profession. In a way we have nothing to tell them. We have no solution to the business model of journalism or the creeping in of precarity in the profession. Our work is almost about something alien to journalism in this visceral sense. It's more about public culture in a very specific definition. It's not about the house on fire problem that journalists have to face now. So, I think our contribution has lacked the urgency to stand out compared to some of the other themes that are out there. We certainly have something to say about the social value of journalism. We show how journalists participate in crucial channels of information and knowledge, helping a modern economy and polity to function. It's hard to imagine one without the other, even as we right now travel in that direction. And I think the project has not yet been understood in those ways, we never spelled it out.

Tomás Undurraga: *In my own experience presenting the results of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the newsrooms of Valor Econômico in São Paulo and Globo in Rio de Janeiro (Undurraga, 2017a, 2017b, 2018), I often encountered surprise—particularly at sociology conferences in Brazil—regarding how I gained access to such spaces. From the standpoint of Brazilian academic sociology, there tends to be a significant level of distrust between mainstream media institutions and researchers. Many social scientists are met with suspicion when approaching financial newsrooms or large media conglomerates like Globo, often due to preconceived notions about the critical or ideological lens they are presumed to bring. What I believe facilitated my access—and even created a welcoming disposition among journalists—was the question about knowledge production in journalism – and probably the fact that we were coming from Cambridge. Rather than focusing on*

ideology or media's relationship to capital, I asked about journalism as a form of knowledge production. This framing was novel to them. It wasn't about scrutinizing their beliefs or institutional affiliations, but about understanding how they, as journalists, produce and convey knowledge about the economy. At Valor Economico they were very proud of their own history, so perhaps they thought that this was a way of showing and sharing their story out.

Interestingly, never worked for me… never opened any doors for me! In the US context, all the work I was able to do was through interviews and archival research. And the reason was always clear, it was quoted to me at some point "Do I want an academic snooping around what we do? I'll pass." It is a variation on what we discussed before, no sense of deference. They think there's no value for them in this. It's more trouble than it's worth, anticipating some reputational loss down the road.

A final point about the Econ Public project that speaks to your experience. We didn't set out to contribute to communication studies or journalism studies, we wanted to learn from what journalists were doing. We were not necessarily looking for lessons to teach back to them. The project did cast a light on best practices, we looked for cases that confirmed our intuition. And I think there is also a lesson, maybe, of boldness: that interesting journalism happens when journalists try out new ideas, try out new ways of representing the economy, and are not intimidated by the authority of established expertise. The perishability of journalism encourages a freedom to experiment.

The other subject that I've recently spent some time looking at is the new economic sociology, post actor network theory. I mean the work of Michel Callon and associates starting in the 1990s and that is now part of that expansive constellation of social studies of finance, critical accounting, valuation studies. I never realized until recently that what we were doing was so similar to what they do. In terms of the role of indexation, calculation, commensuration in various ways. Because we dealt with economic and financial journalism, where practices are copied back and forth between business, academia and journalism, our findings connect better with economic sociology than they do with communication studies.

Tomás Undurraga: *I very much agree with you. In my own research, I was inspired by the new, new economic sociology (McFall and Ossandon, 2014), especially by valuation studies. I felt inspired to understanding these disputes about how to produce value, and how the promise of Valor Economico – of producing economic value through news – was realized. David Stark (2009) work on the value of dissonance, and how organizations produce value when they manage to maintain heterarquical repertoires of valuation frameworks in place, was a big insight for our research.*

Yes, you understood this earlier than me. And this is one of the punchlines of that research. The notion that this social knowledge, that economic knowledge, happens not hierarchically. Knowledge is not coming from academia, and then applied and translated into journalism. But it happens, by way of a distributed exercise of reconfiguration. We used the term bricolage, from Engelen and colleagues, in our discussion on this point. This exercise of constructing something that is sort of generally new, made of bits and pieces of various things, I found quite a lot of this in editorial documents where editors and publishers asked how do we reinvent our magazine or our economic coverage? What are the elements we should put in place? Who should be doing this reporting? Should we get statisticians? Should we get economists? In what roles? Do we ask a statistician to put it all together or ask a narrative writer to do it? How do we digest a week of industry and trade, by number or by story, or by a combination of both? All these editorial discussions are about models, but they are impure models that are constantly being reinterpreted and reinvented. In those discussions, you see undressed what's at stake. You are told of all kinds of pressures and demands that are placed on a publication to succeed. All of that is laid bare. At least, that's what I found, very luckily, in the archives of a few American magazines.

Tomás Undurraga: *You've also studied the role of print media in shaping management culture—particularly how economic knowledge and statistics are communicated through business magazines in the United States. You paid special attention to Fortune and Businessweek as privileged outlets (Mata, 2011). Why did you choose those particular magazines? Could you tell us more about that research?*

Some of that work fed into the ECONPUBLIC project (Mata, 2018), and it was about the representation of the economy. What counts? How do we count it? Who are we counting for? A well-known but not widely acknowledged fact is that magazines and print publications have been pioneers in numerical representation of the economy. We celebrate and think highly of statistical institutes, but before them mass publications were already indexing trade and commerce and prices and industrial activity. When this happened in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, these magazines were unlike what they are today, they were tightly linked to industry and professions. So, they were involved in processes of professionalizing management and engineering. They were tools for the aspiring professional; only much later do they become more like infotainment. Today one finds these publications in sold in airports or train stations, back then they were subscription-based publications delivered at the office addresses of middle or higher management. So, they fit within a particular ecology of professionalism and expertise, and they were pioneers of what we now take for granted as being the normal functions of the statistical state.

Tomás Undurraga: *That's great. If business magazines like Fortune and Businessweek were crucial in the 20th century—not only for shaping economic representations but also for legitimizing corporate capitalism, particularly in the United States—what kinds of media do you think play that role today? Or to put it another way: where are the ideas and ideologies that renew and justify capitalism being produced and circulated now?*

Well, *Wired* has been a crucial partner for the emergence of cyberculture and Silicon Valley mythologies. So that's a publication of interest, that has been maybe not influential on the metric of how many people read it, but certainly an important player in the affirmation of the Californian ideology. I was thinking about this just today. I was supervising a student who wants to work on *Fintech*, and I for the first time was looking up Fintech magazines. But one shouldn't only think about those kinds of formats. I also have a student working on communities that are organized through blockchain. I think print culture and its digital analogs remain vital today. The clue is not to look for size and recognition. When *Business Week* and *Fortune* were vanguards, their circulations were small, you would not find them in newsstands. They were never dominant and hyper visible. It remains crucially important to think in writing and to have long form, so I would venture that any interesting new dimension of our economy or politics will have a viable long form periodical, print or digital, open, behind a pay wall or in a blockchain.

Tomás Undurraga: *Given the current state of affairs, one could argue that the public sphere is in turmoil. We're witnessing increasing fragmentation, growing polarization, a crisis of credibility for traditional journalistic institutions, and the widespread circulation of misinformation. In this context, how do you envision the future of public economic debate?*

I think I'm optimistic, it's a new feeling for me, I am not easily an optimist. Why do I feel that way? I think I am seeing a falling apart. I think the danger was hegemony by the platforms and they are now on the losing side of history. You see people now leaving X, for you know alternatives like bluesky, or Mastodon, but it is meaningful. When you start seeing this feeling of exhaustion and burn out that social media is producing there comes a point when the ground is fertile again for people to exercise critique. I am now familiar with the movement by parents to keep kids away from mobile phones as long as possible. Parents haven't yet realized that they are the problem, that they are hooked on phones too. Half a step, but these are things that weren't there five years ago. To me that suggests that we haven't seen the future. This isn't the future. The future is something else. That there's hope for unweaning ourselves from the asphyxiating power of social media which has been to a large extent the nemesis of a lot of print culture and public debate.

Tomás Undurraga: *I agree that there are some glimmers of hope in those reactions—both at the governmental level and among parents. However, I do think it's very difficult to imagine the public sphere functioning as a broad, collective space for the debate of ideas—especially in a context marked by polarization, misinformation, and the fragmentation of discourse. The cohesive, unified idea of the public sphere—à la Habermas—feels increasingly untenable. Today, the public sphere has few clear boundaries, and in many ways, we're seeing multiple public spheres coexisting in parallel. That, I think, presents a serious challenge for any meaningful form of public debate.*

Well, the Habermasian public sphere was always a normative, regulative ideal, right? Even his story is that it only lasted this instant, and then immediately got subverted and betrayed. So, it hasn't died in the last 20 years. It's always been a fleeting horizon that we've aimed for. And I agree that this is not a bad idea. It would be great, but not necessarily something that we should be endorsing as a middle or short-term goal. I think our immediate goals are to protect social connection and political empowerment. My job these days requires spending a lot of time checking for plagiarism and chatGPT on assessments. It is a veritable pandemic afflicting higher education. And my colleagues wonder why I'm not more depressed. Yet, I'm optimistic there too. I think there has been a moment of enthusiasm with Artificial Intelligence, and we are still in it, the belief that it can do magical things and therefore it can do everything. But we are on our way to realize that it's pretty bad, and it's not going to keep improving. People will realize what they're losing out by relying on it. And that's our hope. Our hope is to make people remember the joy of human connection among teacher and student and among fellow citizens, of doing the work for themselves, of thinking for themselves. That it is a route to a healthier life, an affirming way of living.

Tomás Undurraga: *I just want to believe that people will actually take the hard work of doing the work we have traditionally done in academia.*

Part of that is finding joy in switching off. Going back to paper, for instance, finding joy in paper again, in slowness and craftsmanship, finding joy in being in community and connection. It's tough. Maybe you have noticed that people are complicated.... None of that is easy. But it's a lot better than the screens and the echo chambers they imprison us in.

Tomás Undurraga: *You've also written about social science methodology and the funding regimes that shape academic research. In light of the recent conservative backlash against universities and critical thinking—in Brazil, the United States,*

and elsewhere—two questions arise: What should universities do to protect their autonomy and independence? And where should social scientists studying the public sphere focus their attention in these challenging times?

Yes, I've written on that, and it is one of the topics that I teach at University College London. I run a module called Political Economy of Science, where I look at how science is funded, how science is managed, and how that matters. To me the more frightening story is not the government backlash - although that's pretty frightening, if you're in American universities. But I think the trend that worries me the most is the ongoing loss of power of the faculty to administrative control. Although often it is academics in these administrative positions, the way that power is seized away from the faculty as a democratic body has been hyper-charged in the current regime of universities competing for students in a global marketplace. As higher education has come to be understood as a product to be sold and Universities are no longer understood as civic institutions, this has supercharged this transformation. Universities are no longer bound to a duty towards a national space or citizenry. They are not quite for the highest bidder, but for whoever can afford its fees and costs and have the grades to be admitted. The consumerism has legitimized a centralization of functions and a logic of performance that feeds on these reputational metrics that get excessive attention, global rankings and the like. I see it having a huge impact on what we teach, how we teach and so on. To me that is the biggest story.

But on to the Trump moment and similar targeting of Universities by nativists and populists elsewhere… they are clear in their motives, they see universities draped in cosmopolitan globalism and as a safe haven for their political antagonists. To me the lines are obvious. Universities like Harvard, Princeton and Yale, with deep endowments, they should fight back because they can. Universities that can't survive on the basis of their endowments or student fees and private contracts don't have much choice, to disobey the federal paymasters would have a huge material impact on the life of the institution and everyone around it. The state bludgeon could be an existential threat to many of these institutions, but that still leaves us more than a few that have the privilege to demonstrate that all these values that we subscribe to really matter and stick to principle. Someone has to, so much rests on it. Civil disobedience is going to be the most important means to resist the age of Trump. If no one disobeys, then they will win. That is an invitation to political action, in defense of academic autonomy and of a civic calling, which as I said, is being compromised from the inside too. But I believe that there's merit in defending it, from both external and internal harms. Otherwise, what's the point of being an academic? If we don't have these myths to lighten our load? We need that fiction, we need hope.

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