

**TOPKITSCH EN SLOW SCIENCE: KRITIEK VAN DE
ACADEMISCHE REDE**

René Boomkens

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Introduction: Knowledge-society and Knowledge-economy

Knowledge and technology play a crucial part in modern society. We constantly deal with highly organised institutions and refined technological products, such as banks and computers. However, knowledge about the nature and technological or organisational structure of these everyday products is obtained and produced by few. To understand and work with these products professionally or work at an institution such as a bank requires specialised knowledge which can only be gained through education. René Boomkens, philosopher of culture, claims that the future of individuals in modern society is highly dependent on their educational background. We live in a so-called meritocratic democracy, a political system in which people with specialised knowledge play a great part. We need them in order to maintain our highly organised and technological society and they are of vital importance to our economical growth and social well-being. Boomkens claims that, together with the individualisation inherited from the 1970s, the emphasis on education is the foundation of modern culture.

Topkitsch en slow science by René Boomkens concentrates on the most important institution in these technological cultures: the university. Boomkens criticises the effects on Dutch academic life when universities become too involved in international competition and are managed as if they are economic corporations.

I The Scientist as a Professional & the Caricature of Academic Management

According to Boomkens, in earlier days, the social status of the academic was clear: a professor was a highly respected man. Today we just consider him to be some sort of professional, not different from non-academic professionals. However, the nature of the scientific profession is not quite clear. In order clear this vagueness of academic life, the government has made multiple efforts to direct and label the academic profession. Boomkens observes the three most important of these efforts.

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The first effort is what he calls an *international disciplining* of the scientists and academic life. International disciplining is an attempt to quantify scientific work, so that academic achievements can be compared and judged globally. The quality of universities and its scientists is measured by the number of articles published, and the frequency with which they are published in so-called 'top-journals'. According to Boomkens, there are a number of problems with this international disciplining. The problem highlighted by him is that all 'top-journals' are either British or American. Articles published about national politics or for public debate are thus not taken into account. This is especially problematic for the social sciences, which are mostly concerned with long-term cultural and national research.

The *national disciplining* of academic life is another issue that concerns Boomkens. Scientific research is expected to contribute directly to society. The Dutch government tries to stimulate this by minimizing the standard governmental budget for sciences. Scientists are thus more dependent on external sponsors for funding their research. This might not be too problematic for the technological sciences, but the social sciences seem to be in trouble again. Since their research does not necessarily produce innovations, or has a direct influence on the economy, hardly any corporations are likely to fund research in this area. A third strategy to discipline sciences has been a procedure of mass *flexibilisation*.

Universities should adapt their research and education in such a way that they can be easily judged and controlled on the national and the international scale. This procedure means multiple visitations by external committees¹, Dublin descriptors² and the constant restructuring and reorganising of academic life. All these controlling efforts have created a bureaucratic layer in the management of universities. The main concerns of this bureaucratic layer are the market value, efficiency and flexibility of academics and education. Boomkens argues that these values should not be prioritised over the *quality* of research, researchers and scientific education.

Boomkens claims that the quality of scientific research and academic life are threatened by this quantification and disciplining. The quality of scientists is measured solely by academic output: by their number of publications in Anglo-Saxon journals and by their position in the citation index.³ A clear hierarchy of scientific tasks is revealed. Tasks which are *appreciated, rewarded* and *stimulated* are: research, international publishing, publishing on your specific area of research, and publishing in English. Tasks which are considered of less importance and which are therefore *not encouraged* are:

¹ These visitations consist of the testing of the quality of scientific research performed at and education given at universities by external committees.

² Descriptors which prescribe certain conditions that scientific education should meet.

³ The citation index is a database of information concerning the amount of times an academic is referred to in scientific articles. The information is gained from a wide list of scientific journals.

educating, national publishing, publishing for public debate and publishing in different languages. In this way, the modern ideal type of scientists is shaped.

II Three Reforms: Three Failures?

Boomkens notes that in the last few decades, Dutch universities had to cope with all sorts of educational and organisational changes. He discusses three of the most important reforms. Firstly, there is 'Bologna': an attempt to realise a uniform European system of academic education. It is a procedure responsible for the current Bachelor-Master system and, according to Boomkens, a fake reform. Whereas students are told that when they receive their Bachelor degree they have accomplished a full scientific education, this is not the case. Not even when they continue studying and earn their Masters degree. Most of these Master degrees can only account for a prolonging of their Bachelor study. Both degrees are not what they claim to be. They are not exemplary of the quality of a full educational curriculum. Boomkens claims that if a random number of Bachelor or Master theses in a certain scientific field are read, it will become obvious that the authors are only in the middle of their education.

Secondly, there is the attempt to internationalise scientific education by interuniversity agreements about exchange programs. These agreements, however, are not based on the quality and content of the studies taught at the involved universities. When students decide to continue their study at a foreign university, the university of their choice is in most cases not one of the universities with which their home university has an agreement.

The third reform concerns the way universities have to profile themselves: as top-universities that offer every potential student the education they desire. Boomkens calls the way universities label themselves and their education as 'top', kitsch. In his opinion, universities are judged almost purely by their output instead of by the quality of their research and education. Therefore their so called 'top' image is nothing but *topkitsch*.

III Science and Culture: The Fate of the Sciences of Culture

In this chapter Boomkens paints a picture of the ideal cultural scientist. Technologicalisation, democratisation and decolonialisation changed the ways in which culture is understood and described. In contrast to the past, cultures and collective identities are not easily distinguished and described by a small group of intellectuals. The modern cultural scientist has to take into account various influences such as globalisation, popular media (television) and the various ethnic and religious groups. The modern scientist of culture should be active on the international scale, but it is at least as important that he is active on the regional and the national scale.

IV A Critical University?

A modern Dutch university likes to profile itself as ‘enterprising’ and ‘economical’. In order to understand what this means, Boomkens discusses three ideal types of universities introduced by Kor Gritt⁴: the classic university, the critical university and the economical university. At the *classic* university, knowledge is understood as the product of the human mind. Freeing ourselves of (religious) dogmas in order to gain knowledge is the main aim of the classic university. From this type of university two separate academic styles emerged; the style used in natural science and style used in humanities. For the latter of these styles, the social character of science was considered to be crucial. Here, the foundation for a new ideal type of university was laid. This new type is the *critical* university. A university profiled as an emancipator of people in which the political content and the meaning of scientific research were emphasised. In the 1970s the social relevance of scientific research was re-evaluated and explained in a different way. Not the political contribution but the efficiency of academic life was what mattered most. This way of looking at academic life is the main aspect of the *economical* type of university. The *economical* university tries to judge and control academic life by valorising and quantifying science and education. Reflecting on this modern *economical* ideal and on the developments in the academic organisation mentioned before, Boomkens raises the question whether the university really has become some sort of corporation, and if so, whether the end of free scientific practice is near.

V Excursion: No Escape? *Dialectiek van de Verlichting* Revisited & Slow Science: Higher Uselessness

Boomkens discusses the book *Dialectiek van de Verlichting*⁵ by Adorno and Horkheimer in order to gain a critical perspective on the processes of rationalisation of the Enlightenment. According to Boomkens, the main conclusion of the book is that the necessary path of the Enlightenment has come to its end with the Second World War, fascism and Nazism. Reason has become irrational, and if we want to save the *rationale* we should stop reasoning.

Adorno and Horkheimer characterise the Enlightenment as an attempt to control nature and ‘the unknown’. Science has helped discipline human beings in such a way that they have become a homogenous mass which is easily controlled. This obsession with control has ultimately led to the exclusion and extinction of everything outside our comfort zone, of everything that is different.⁶ It has made people into a group of numbers. It seems that science can not escape its own destruction.

⁴ Kor Gritt, *Economisering als probleem*, Van Gorcum, z.p., 2000, p. 111-119.

⁵ Max Horkheimer & Theodor Adorno, *Dialectiek van de Verlichting. Filosofische fragmenten*, Amsterdam: Boom 2007.

⁶ According to Boomkens, Adorno & Horkheimer typify the Holocaust in this way.

Boomkens claims that although with hindsight this damnation of the Enlightenment seems extravagant, Adorno and Horkheimers insights show us that outside the controllable and quantifiable world of reason, more exists. Denying the fact that not all aspects of the world can be controlled by reason will result in an irrational view of the world. Therefore, these insights remain important for criticising the rationality of modern developments, the current development of the university being one of them.

According to Boomkens, the thing that bothers most modern readers of the philosophical book is the way in which Adorno and Horkheimer present it: as a reconstruction of the necessary dialectic historical process of Enlightenment from the myth of Odysseus until modern times. The book smacks of absolutism. However, when characterised as an *interpretation* of the history of the Enlightenment, *Dialectiek van de Verlichting* is undeniably convincing as an effective, therapeutic self-criticism of the Enlightenment and its consequences. It is exactly this therapeutic critical characteristic that a modern scientist should have.

The obsession with economical growth and control of science and nature is poison to the faculties of social science, philosophy and theology. The disciplines in the social and cultural fields of science are mostly important for what Boomkens calls their *unproductivity*. They do not produce multitudes of new products and do not necessarily have a *direct* influence on economy or on society. With their criticism and reflection they often even stand in the way of the development of society in a certain direction. Beauty, the finding of truth and criticism are what these sciences aim for. Boomkens pleads for *slow science*, science that is based on unproductivity, thwarting knowledge and (self)criticism, science that is mainly concerned with reflecting on the values that underlie or justify cultural, political and social developments and theories.

Conclusion

The implications, as signalised by Boomkens, of approaching universities as if they were (economical) corporations, are made very plausible. The power of Boomkens's criticism is that he not only succeeds in showing what aspects of the various modes of disciplining and judging have negative effects, but also which sciences fall victim to these implications. Boomkens's book differs from an ordinary song of lamentation about the economisation of academic life by clearly describing the importance and content of the tasks of academics that are not directly socially relevant, innovative or stimulating for economy. The dark side of the process of disciplining and quantifying academic life is clearly described by Boomkens. In my opinion, however, his criticism lacks a discussion of the underlying thoughts of these processes. Surely they are based on certain values and theories. Unfortunately, this theoretical background remains untouched by Boomkens. Nonetheless, *Topkitsch en slow science* is a convincing book. It is worth reading as it

encourages people to re-appreciate sciences whose main concerns are beauty, the finding of truth and being critical. These values should not be sacrificed for economical purposes.

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