Alertly present and unencumbered by the weight of bureaucracy and institutional history, early career researchers can offer productively critical viewpoints on institutions of higher learning. They should comment publicly and eschew anonymity when they do.

Around 1552 a precocious twenty-something named Étienne de La Boétie penned a slim yet ardent political tract under the weighty title of Discourse on Voluntary Servitude. The young French humanist advocated in his treatise the unshackling of the populace from the hierarchy that enslaved it, brazenly claiming that all that was necessary for the achievement of freedom was the will to freedom. It was the kind of argument that only a young person could make, not because it was naïve but because of its unflinching stride; one senses that the ink could not flow quickly enough from the quill to keep apace with the ideas that La Boétie’s energetic mind was fashioning. His snappy argument smelled of revolutionary fodder in a world tottering fragilely, still unknowingly, towards Reformation. But La Boétie had his wits about him. Already a parlementaire in Bourdeaux, he restricted his initial readership to a close-knit intellectual circle. The scholar and politico recognized that it was only in this semi-private space that a text open to controversy, misinterpretation and usurpation might safely circulate. The turbulent later history of his text would prove him right.

Four decades after La Boétie wrote the Discourse, amidst the growing tensions of the Wars of Religion, the scholarly heavyweight and his close friend Michel de Montaigne reconsidered his intention to include the polemic as the centrepiece of his Essais, placing an elegy on friendship where the piece was initially to appear. Perhaps borne out of belief in the innocence of the Discourse but also for self-protection, Montaigne declared that La Boétie had written the piece only as a youthful ‘exercise.’ No need to take him seriously, the essayist suggested. Two centuries later and with less kindly motivations, another Frenchman again refused the ideas of the Discourse gravitas. The literary critic Charles Augustin Sainte Beuve slighted the work with astonishingly contemporary sting, deeming it, though ‘sincere,’ a work of ‘adolescent enthusiasms,’ and a ‘masterwork of second-year rhetoric.’ Abetted by his premature death, La Boétie became, in certain circles, the eponymous not-yet-there, his youthfulness shepherded at once to protect and dismiss his ideas.

La Boétie emerged in my thoughts last week as I read a collection of articles that publicise the challenges of early career academic life. Published on The Guardian’s Early Career Researchers platform, the pieces are provocative in articulating what often goes unsaid in the UK, where the quantity of early career researchers offering public comment on academic institutions is scanty. The trio is arresting, particularly in the British context, where the scale and pace of debate surrounding recent opinion pieces by early career researchers in US publications leave us in wide-eyed wonderment. The articles should be celebrated, then, for converting little-mentioned institutional themes into topics of national debate.

The pieces carry bold and pointed titles such as ‘Stick or Twist: the postdoctoral dilemma,’ ‘The truth of the academic job hunt – even one with a happy ending,’ and ‘PhD: so what does it really stand for?’ Like La Boétie, the commentators enact small revolutions in committing to print their institutional criticisms, lamentations and counsels for reform and renovation. The forum in which the polemical pieces appear means, moreover, that, in marked contrast to the initial circulation of the Discourse, they are freely available to all who possess uncensored Internet access.
Yet the writers are not as audacious as La Boétie. The Frenchman may have limited the initial readership of the *Discourse* but he knew that when the text went public, his name would too. These articles, in contrast, appear under cloak of anonymity. The byline that accompanies one piece states only that the nameless author is a post-doctoral researcher in Italy. Another notes that, ‘The authors [sic] name has been withheld to allow them freedom to comment upon the challenges faced by early career researchers, without damaging their own job prospects.’ The writers apparently do not believe themselves free to put their names to their criticisms because they are not yet there and, unprotected by namelessness, they might not ever get there.

I have some sympathy for the choice of authorial anonymity and its endorsement by the *Guardian*. I too am a PhD candidate. I have written commentary on the academic pay scale, the role of the thesis advisor, government funding and women and leadership in academia. Almost all of those pieces remain safely filed away in the far corners of my laptop. This truth is painfully ironic given that I am a historian of public debate (in Argentina), acutely aware of the perils of self-censorship, pared-down spaces of public debate and elite-dominated national conversations. But how do you publicly critique or propose betterments to institutions from which you might one day seek employment? What might the career consequences be? And should you, anyway, when you are not yet there?

Being not yet there is, apart from anything else, a state of anticipation: waiting for a certain kind of legitimacy, waiting for greater financial, intellectual and - let us not deny it - status surety. The anticipation of a better, more secure personal future makes commenting from the comfort of anonymity an attractive proposition. We can apparently both contribute to the discussion of institutions and mitigate the risk of those opinions damaging our chances of becoming part of one. But the problem, of course, with this ‘best of both worlds’ approach is that if anonymous institutional comment underpins our shared state of anticipation, we surely await a future in which anonymity has already sedimented as a legitimate - perhaps necessary - condition for debating institutions. And that does not spell a better collective future.

This is not the (perhaps) humble anonymity of philanthropy but the fear-driven anonymity once associated with Enlightenment sedition. The pre-history that we are currently living and making, in which potential future thought-leaders underpin their debate with the sentiment of fear, is, then, disquieting. The *Guardian* commentator who chose anonymity for fear of ‘damaging’ his or her career prospects - rendering more precarious his or her future and that, perhaps, of his or her dependents, is surely not alone. Academic institutions may be centres of critique, but it is difficult to imagine that they would place top of their job lists, at least without first pausing for thought, the candidate who decried their own structures. The plenitude of early career stage gives them no clear need to fast-track supposed heretics or rabble-rousers, even ones who offer potential solutions along with their criticism.

This kind of institutional backlash is, of course both difficult to trace and, I hope, a wholly inaccurate perception. Yet the anonymous submissions in the *Guardian* make evident a ‘feeling’ or suspicion of its truth among early career researchers. The anaemic body of young academics contributing to national public debate on institutions of higher learning suggests that a critical mass of early career researchers share in this sense of anxiety. This unhealthy public quietness hints at a form of self-censorship among the youngest generation of a profession that supposedly drives ideas and facilitates change-making conversation. The feeling, then, ought not to be ignored.

Other fears may also come into play. Those early in their career might fear ridicule for attempting to comment from so lowly a ‘station’ in a clearly hierarchical profession. We risk
being accused, like La Boétie, of holding youthful fancies or impatiently putting our academic pubescence on public display. We might fear presenting openly an argument that turns out to reap little backing - revealing our outsider status in embarrassingly public form.

Anonymity may enticingly appear to dissolve this last anxiety, for it seems to afford the writer powers of collective representation. The nameless writer can transform, inaccurately, in the mind of the reader from individual thinker into the figure of the early career researcher. Or, the incognito commentator may be taken, erroneously, as an envoy charged with speaking for the multitude. Pascal Junod, the Swiss cryptologist and blogger, recently published on his website a ‘letter of resignation’ that a PhD student had apparently sent to every researcher at his/her training institution, the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL). Junod omitted the name of the letter writer (offering fair reasons for this decision) and clarified that, ‘I did not experience the same feelings at all during my (very happy) PhD times at EPFL. So, don’t try to make any parallel with my own experience.’ Junod believed that the letter writer had criticisms worth hearing (if, he admits, no solutions to the problems that the letter enumerates) but was at pains to provide a necessary reminder that anonymity is not, and must not be considered, synonymous with collective representation.

We may also be bearing witness in institutional debate to an unhelpful contamination from patterns of academic training. In our disciplines, we have reason to defer to experts who have slowly and patiently accreted both a wealth of knowledge in their specialisms and a variety of techniques for converting that knowledge into disseminable understanding. Advisors, when they do their job well, train their students, apart from anything else, to write and think and engage in certain ways until they have so mastered these techniques that they are ready to make of them something new. Not for nothing one Harvard professor recently described postgraduate training as ‘an apprenticeship of sorts, regardless of field,’ using a lexis that is no anachronism even as it evokes the role of the earliest medieval universities. Some academics might cavil at the comparison with the world that was but even the most liberal universities indubitably work on the premise; we need only to consider the slew of assessments through which students must progress at every stage.

Yet institutional critique is an altogether different matter, and the two deserve not to be confused or conflated. Any profession or industry has its flaws, and those imperfections have a habit of revealing themselves most clearly to new entrants. No longer wholly an outsider but not yet securely inside either, they may offer, if allowed, insightful viewpoints because they are at once alertly present and un-bogged down by the - sometimes heavy - weight of bureaucracy and institutional history. This liminality can be enlightening.

Public silences and namelessness are both always new and already, many times over, history. We are irrevocably intimate with their implications, chief among them failure to take seriously (if at all) the ideas of the full diversity of the population, and the writing out of voices. Poor voices. The voices of ‘Half the Sky.’ When feminist post-colonial scholarship emerged as a ‘discursive effect’ that could disrupt ‘the master narratives of western culture,’ it sought to reclaim a vocalness denied through silences and anonymities. These family resemblances beg the question: must an intentional ‘scholarship of the not-yet-there’ emerge for the voices of those early in their career to gain legitimacy and listeners in public institutional debate? Its necessity would be lamentable but a pro-active method, bubbling with forward-looking thought, may be no bad thing.

‘Are we there yet?’ is a question familiar to anyone who ever took a family road trip as a child. Asked insistently enough, it would elicit a silencing if spluttering juice box or a fun-for-five-minutes car game. ‘Be patient!’ we might be told. Or, the white lie - ‘we’re not too far, now.’ Those trips taught us patience, or that we were not patient. Later, experience revealed to us
that patience is not always a virtue, despite the values that a western education had attempted to inculcate in us. That system was designed to serve the nineteenth-century industrial needs of servitude, discipline and order, not to nurture productively rebellious creativity.

Here is a scenario in which we should take experience as our guide: we must eschew waiting patiently, silently, anonymously for what might come. We would do better, instead, to think 'with' La Boétie and open ourselves to the risks that putting into the world texts that critique institutions can engender. The afterlives of those texts, like those of the Discours, will be uncertain and unpredictable. They may barely elicit any readership. They might be submitted to the whims and beliefs of myriad reading publics. But we will surely delegitimize, not just in theory but also through practice, the dangerously accepted (if not expected) anonymity now emerging as a condition for institutional debate.

Putting our names to our opinions before we are unsure whether we will ever get signals an encouragingly optimistic pre-history to an unknown future; a method of creating an imminent public forum in which scholars can productively critique, their names and faces revealed, the institutions that apparently, hopefully make critics of us.

And that is the kind of future to which I, at least, would like to belong.

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