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+ GEOGRAPHICA HELVETICA +

Intervention

Not policing but silence. Reflections on academic practice in a small state

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Abstract. This paper is a personal reflection on academic practices at a small state university, specifically the University of Luxembourg (UL). It was initially inspired by the thoughts on field methods in "closed contexts" of Koch (2013a), who discusses research conducted in authoritarian states and places. Although this setting does not fit the case presented here, the context of the small state and its young university (founded in 2003) is specific and ambivalent. The government has made significant efforts to establish knowledge, research, and higher education as pillars of Luxembourg's economy and society. On the other hand, the place of the university in society remains unclear at best. The problem discussed here is not that research is threatened by policing. Rather, the creation of independent, evidence-based, and critical knowledge conflicts with the overarching political interest in maintaining the country's political economy unquestioned; furthermore, scientific knowledge suffers from a lack of attentive interaction by the public. This results in the authorities' deliberate silence, which disregards critical scientific evidence without questioning it. Disregarding scientific evidence, however, would damage the academic ethos, limit the young university's aspirations, and call into question the small state's ambitions in the knowledge economy.

1 Introduction

The relationship between science and policy, and between research and practice, is of the utmost importance to every academic institution. Society and the public expect universities to serve the public interest by providing research results, educational services, and degrees and by collaborating with practitioners. While programmes focusing on knowledge transfer and application explicitly demand social benefits, university members are also required to demonstrate competitiveness and excellence based on quantifiable parameters. Universities are expected to demonstrate societal impact and internationally competitive excellence. This shift has significantly shaped their agenda recently (Reed et al., 2018). This shift indicates a fundamental transformation in the relationship between science and society that can be observed in many countries. As a result of these rising demands and expectations, universities – especially large, traditional universities and smaller departments in the humanities and social sciences – find their autonomy and reputation questioned. They must integrate political imperatives and entrepreneurial goals, such as competition, fundraising, accountability, and flexible employment strategies, into their actions. Thus, politics not only changes scientific work, but also determines what is and is not researched.

This is the starting point of my reflection, which was initially inspired by the introduction of Koch (2013a) to a special issue of *Area* on field methods in "closed contexts". The debate concerns research conducted in authoritarian states and places, where specific constraints exist on producing open, independent knowledge that could challenge the interests or legitimacy of ruling powers. Under such circumstances, conducting scientific research can be extremely difficult, if not impossible. Of course, the notion of an authoritarian or hybrid state does not apply to the setting from which this paper reports. However, the context of the small state of Luxembourg and its young university, which is the subject of this paper, is both specific and ambivalent. Small systems are said to have an enormous learning capacity; however, they tend to be hermetic and introverted and are often dominated by internal debates and closed to open, crit-

ical discourse. While the government has made significant efforts to establish knowledge, research, and higher education as a new pillar of the economy and society, the role of the university remains unclear (Hesse, 2017). Is its primary purpose to produce usable knowledge? Or should it also contribute to alternative, critical readings of the state, its institutions, and related practices? What interests are represented and served in this process, and how can local and general interests be balanced to benefit the institution and its members? By discussing these questions, I aim to contextualize individual involvement within broader circumstances (Van Meeteren, 2019) by applying a kind of "autobiographical airing of dilemmas and experiences" (Mohammad and Sidaway, 2013:433). This approach allows the development of a strong argument based on proper empirical observation and interpretation, while many of these aspects also unfold within structural framework conditions. My main point is that the authorities and much of the public respond to critical research with deliberate silence. They are not opening the discourse with the young, publicly funded university, but rather closing it.

Against this background, the remainder of the paper is divided into three sections. The second section provides context and reflects on the author's experience with human geography and planning studies. The third section briefly reviews epistemologies of conflict between mainstream and critical approaches to the country's development trajectory. It reveals knowledge claims where science and policy collide. The final section discusses potential changes, including knowledge and methods, the self-understanding of the university, and societal attitudes toward inconvenient knowledge.

2 The context of the small university in a small state

This intervention offers a personal reflection on academic practices at the University of Luxembourg (UL) in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. The UL was established to enable Luxembourg to keep pace with contemporary developments toward a knowledge-based society and reduce its dependence on services, especially financial services. According to its founding act of 2003, three existing university centres merged to form the new institution. Consequently, the UL began offering full bachelor's and master's degree programmes, enabling students to earn a degree without travelling to neighbouring countries. However, during the UL's founding period, there was political controversy over whether the government should invest in a university at all, weighing the costs and benefits of such an investment. One corner of the debate argued in favour of the given practice to let students go abroad; the other was obviously more aware of the risk associated with exposing society to international influence.

Small states are specific and ambivalent in terms of political, institutional, and administrative contexts (Veenendaal and Corbett, 2015). Among others, this also applies to the relationship between science and society. On the one hand, they usually offer quick access to decision-making levels and to the field of research itself. Early phases during the establishment of a new university are also often accompanied by constant expansion and ample funding. These factors make working at such a location attractive, particularly if it is the country's only full university. This is in contrast to universities in larger countries, which not only face the usual challenges of budget cuts and curricular reforms, but also must compete with other institutions of the same kind. Luxembourg also seems specific regarding its smallness, for three reasons: (a) the *very* small size of the state compared to countries such as the Netherlands or Switzerland; (b) the particular role of *social relations* in the forming of the elites; (c) the speed of growth and modernization that kept family and expert ties together, rather than disrupting them over time. On the other hand, small states tend to adopt an exploitative attitude toward their knowledge producers. The phrase "*Uni: fir waat?*" (Luxembourgish for "*Uni: for what purpose?*") is widespread in the country. There are high expectations that investments in universities and public research bodies will yield measurable returns in terms of knowledge, patents, and market opportunities. This belief is often based on linear and causal assumptions, as certain results are assumed in order to validate or legitimate the investments. These expectations are articulated quite directly at various levels, including by the public, the media, Parliament, and the government. While it is certainly legitimate to expect that a university generates output and impact, the mechanistic assumption that a specific output will emerge from a calculable input based on a predefined research rationale is problematic. The situation worsens when findings and interpretations are troublesome for policy and practice because they critically address the country's politics or particular interests. Therefore, this type of knowledge can often be considered "inconvenient".

This phenomenon also applies to geography and spatial planning. Unlike biomedicine (research on Parkinson's disease), European politics and law, or digital security, these two disciplines have never been among the UL's main research pillars. However, both fields can serve as catalysts for societal impact, since they address important scientific and, specifically, real-world problems related to contemporary development. They pursue questions of appropriate knowledge generation and address practical challenges to identify subjects, evaluate problems, and identify strategies to resolve them if possible. Spatial planning, a combination of an academic discipline and an engineering branch, aims to understand, critically assess, and improve land use and spatial relationships. However, both geography and planning are closely linked to public policy, making them susceptible to conflict. This is also likely to happen in other fields of collaboration, such as social sciences or education studies.

This reflection is written from the perspective of a geographer and spatial planner with a focus on urban studies. Initially, the author held the Urban Studies Chair at the Uni-

versity of Luxembourg (UL). The chair was funded by the country's capital city; the joint initiative between the city and the university aimed to establish a knowledge base useful for addressing the urban and regional challenges of a small, fast-growing, highly globalized service capital. The main means chosen for creating such a knowledge basis were various forms of exchange and collaboration between research and practice, which were applied on a contractual basis. These include the chair and also the establishment of a platform for urban policy jointly by the university, the state, and municipalities. They were complemented by a range of informal or voluntary activities. They all aimed at supporting public policy at state and municipal levels, providing up-to-date knowledge on urban issues such as cities in small states, land use planning, housing, smart cities, and city–university collaboration. The commitment also included bringing international conferences to the country, organizing workshops for participating partners, and documenting such events. The chair was an integral part of what is now the Department of Geography and Spatial Planning. Government representatives explicitly supported the department's establishment when the university was founded. Furthermore, the team established close networks with researchers and practitioners in the field, including foundations, associations (including NGOs), chambers, municipalities, government representatives, and professionals, such as architects and planners.

However, after nearly one decade of collaboration, the relationship between university members and their partners became tense, mainly due to different and critical world views taken by researchers compared to mainstream positions of the government. Some activities were planned for only a short period, while others lost traction due to changing political circumstances, such as shifts in mayoral offices. Contractual arrangements for collaboration were abandoned or expired. The chair's funding was not renewed after the initial term ended, with no explanation given. It is said that the UL's move away from the capital city and occupation of a new campus was the reason why the chair was not funded further by the new mayor. The research–policy interface linked to the chair was put on hold, and its coordinating role was later re-advertised. There was some disagreement about whether the university members' input was too "scientific" and thus of limited use in practice. However, this was never openly discussed, and deliberate silence was the dominant way of communicating dissent, followed by retreat from collaboration. The hitherto quite successful informal alliance between the department and the city of Esch-sur-Alzette on university–city relationships ended after three public hearings. The mayor claimed that once UL moved to the new campus, further work on university–city relationships would not be necessary. This was an astonishing judgement considering that the association between town and gown had just begun to take effect. Unsurprisingly, the university team's informal platform, "Observatoire Belval", which was created to collect data and promote regular exchanges between public and private stakeholders, lost momentum after a few years due to a lack of funding and commitment from practice. When the team decided to finally abandon the platform, this went unnoticed by the partners.

3 Epistemologies of conflict

What issues lay behind these developments? What do they reveal about the relationship between science and society, along with related modes of engagement and disengagement? Why was this work eventually met with an unusual degree of silence, absence, and non-response? Inspired by the work of Rydin (2007) on knowledge in planning theory and science and society contexts, this section addresses key issues by discussing selected knowledge claims. These knowledge claims emerged as different – and sometimes competing – ways of understanding causal relationships in complex matters such as planning or the development process (Rydin, 2007:56). In this analysis, knowledge claims serve as the organizing principle through which I address the epistemological problem and structure my argument: firstly, how to make sense of the given situation and associated problems; secondly, how to assess the normative outline of plans and policies; and thirdly, how the science–policy interface works in the context of social relations. These knowledge claims may also explain why the small state is difficult terrain for research and interacting with practice and policy.

Several specific claims can be identified here in order to analyse the conflicting relationship between academy and society more precisely. Firstly, there is an *empirical knowledge claim* based on a common perception of what the actual problem of the country and its cities is about. There is no space available to pay justice to the complex development patterns and dynamics of the small but global financial centre; for that purpose, we can refer to numerous research results (Hesse, 2015, 2024). According to these works, we see a rather specific city-state formation at work, with a striving political economy that imposes an immense pressure on natural resources, the built environment, and infrastructure, almost ubiquitously (Hesse and Wong, 2020; Wong et al., 2022). Considering the strong growth rates of recent decades that made Luxembourg become one of the economically most prosperous countries of the world, it is admittedly difficult to absorb such pressure properly. However, the country's sprawling, compartmentalized landscape, which comprises a strange mixture of over-urbanized areas embedded in a peri-urban setting, cannot be understood without considering its political economy.

This is the perspective or claim consolidated by research. From the practice position, the very specificities of the Grand Duchy are largely overlooked. Instead, official policies tend to treat the country's situation as "normal" as it could be, for example, compared to neighbour cities and agglomerations such as Trier, Germany, or Metz, northern France. The

long-standing claim made by geographers that the built environment of the small but global state and its capital can only be properly understood in its socio-economic constitution had no further effect, presumably for different reasons. One explanation is that the extraordinary economic fortune of the country is considered politically sacrosanct and that it must not be questioned in public debates; also, one-half of the population (the autochthon, led by local elites) enjoys a number of benefits arising from Luxembourg's status as a financial centre, such as extremely well paid employment in the public sector and rather high property prices, a globalization dividend due to land ownership and heritage. As soon as the country's business model is doubted, such privileges would of course be called into question. Therefore, common urban and planning discourses are expected to gloss over the root causes of accelerated development, which unfold in demographic and economic growth, the primacy of further development (and here the prioritization of office space), and a politics of land scarcity and hoarding.

Secondly, the mainstream *normative or predictive knowledge claim* about the policy and practice of development neglects their fundamental embeddedness in society, the economy, and space. This brings about an orthodox, territorialist interpretation of planning for the built environment, largely pursuing a mix of centralized concentration and high building density. Densification in particular is seen as the key to providing space (office, housing) while limiting further suburbanization and peri-urbanization. However, this policy approach suffers from contradictions that are inherent to the country's business model: as long as job growth and office production are needed in order to feed the financial centre's competitive position (and thus keeping Luxembourg's social security system at work), the spatial mismatch that has altered the job–housing balance remains critical; as long as the municipalities are mainly responsible for planning and building (only formally supervised by the state), the power of overarching planning prescriptions is limited, and, as long as the politics of property remain uncontrolled or are even supported by the state, nothing will change for the better. For the time being, the country's planning policy is undecided between the two different ends of intervention: growth and development on the one hand, order and control on the other. The same applies to municipalities that are leaning either to growth or to no-growth practices, often based on the question of which individuals may benefit. This is the setting within which fundamental challenges and contradictions of growth, development, and planning have had no place in the official discourse. For sure, silence or ignorance will not make policies any better; the small state and a number of municipal governments, however, operate in a climate of control which keeps doubt, questions, or criticism effectively out of consideration. The reasons for this setting are partly historical: the country gained sovereignty from big powers and was built on political and economic consensus, which seems similar to corporatist modes of conflict-solving in many welfare states or, for example, to the all-party governance tradition in Switzerland; Luxembourg has also never had its 1968, and the ruling class has never been exposed to a critical counterpublic, until today.

Thirdly, this brings us to the critically important knowledge claim related to the *interaction between science, policy, and civil society*. Criteria for assessing these interactions may include the appropriateness of analyses supporting policy aims and objectives, transparency in generating findings and justifying policies, and openness in arguments establishing a basis for decision-making. One could argue that the researchers were committed to the scientific ethos of the university, behaving transparently and openly during their encounters with practice. In contrast, practice partners had difficulty accepting these criteria. The state and municipalities largely relied on micromanagement instead of formulating strategies (which would bear the risk of being held accountable or disputed). Problem areas and steering priorities were rarely defined transparently because topical controversies were not subject to open debate. Furthermore, latent conflicts between the state and local authorities hinder coordinated public policy which would be needed to domesticate private interests. Consultative practice rarely took place in uncontrolled settings at that time. Public participation has only recently gained momentum, but it remains unclear to what extent the outcomes of civil society engagement contribute to the authorities' decision-making processes. Thus, the political-administrative system seems closed off to major inspirations for practice, especially those from outside sources such as professional expertise or citizen input. For more information on the complexities of internal and external perspectives, see Hesse (2023). Admittedly, the institutions in charge could hardly have been prepared for the waves of growth that have altered the country's geography so massively since the late 1980s. This may explain inertia, path dependence, and some deficiencies of the policy process. However, this does not justify the persistence with which the subtle technocracy of silencing is practised, especially considering that the development pressure is also a result of dedicated political practice.

To sum up these observations and interpretations, the country's specific circumstances – a narrow understanding of a city transformed into a financial centre (an extraordinary urban configuration), the appeal of heroic yet context-free engineering practice, and the silent but authoritarian attitude among the officials – have shaped the development and planning arenas in a way that renders major problems unsolvable. This setting will become even more challenging due to pressing problems such as the dramatic lack of housing, rising socio-economic inequality, and the risks of climate change, without the prospect of short-term solutions. Therefore, it is difficult to imagine that the necessary problem-solving capacity will be established in due time as long as the authorities' practices are determined by closed contexts, silence, and non-responsiveness. Conversely, openness, transparency, and

a willingness to speak to criticism would be essential for productive science–policy interactions. Geography and geographers can contribute significantly to enhancing public policy (Lin et al., 2022).

4 Potentials for change

The problem discussed in this case and context is not that research would be threatened by policing. It is challenged by hegemonic beliefs, interests, and power; by path dependence in a setting that seems reluctant to modernize; and by the lack of an attentive, interactive public, which has its roots in an apolitical society (Thill, 2023). These factors result in a subtle yet deliberate silence. Silence signifies non-response, denial of specific context (which to emphasize would effectively require critical analyses), and de-politicization of the subject. It occurs when science–policy interactions are not the starting point of an open endeavour, but rather result in a technocratic closure of debate and avoidance of contestation. However, it can be argued that a climate that keeps scientific evidence out of consideration would damage the academic ethos, limit the aspirations of the young university, and also limit the ambitions of the small state to find its place in the knowledge economy.

How can openness and the ability to stand contestation be brought forward in a setting of deliberate silence? This reminds us of policies that support innovation in non-innovative milieus. Obviously, existing routines of action need to be disturbed, as traditional power relations should not remain untouched. Three steps can be considered to unleash the potential for productive interactions between science and policy: firstly, the partners involved should redefine the role of knowledge creation, transfer, and application, even though this sounds somewhat self-evident. The criteria for productive interactions between science and policy are clear: the conditions for action must be understood and acknowledged by all parties, mutual interest and respect for the perspectives of all involved parties are essential, openness to well-founded criticism is necessary to transform the joint discourse into a viable course of action, and communication must occur in a shared language. This sounds like a contradiction in itself; however, openness, dialogue, and transparency are necessarily essential parts of any strategy to overcome silence. They can help in establishing an essentially reflexive interaction between the actors, where the field's representatives act as "reflective practitioners" (Schoen, 1983) and researchers demonstrate thorough sensitivity to practical problems. Both could be considered important requirements for making any "co-production" of knowledge – the joint development of strategies and policy measures with science, politics, and citizens – fruitful, relevant, and practically effective. Such new concepts, often based on promising terms and trendy ideas, should not be seen as a "quick fix" that can be easily imported, but they must adapt to the country's specific context, must be open to conflict, and need to overcome closure.

Secondly, the search for co-production requires a change in political and societal attitudes toward the sciences and how policy interacts with the research communities. Actors in politics and administration must be open to collaboration based on critical knowledge. For example, one could view the encounter with academia as independent consultation on a level playing field rather than primarily contract-based consultancy, where one side orders and the other has to deliver. While responsibility for urban–regional issues has apparently shifted to the informed public and participation is recognized as a cornerstone of policy and planning, public bodies are confronted with complex, non-trivial bundles of problems that are difficult to communicate, let alone resolve. The question is then also whether and how the political and administrative actors are prepared for the current challenges and which governance approaches could be helpful here; 30 years after New Public Management, this also includes the effective linkage of organization and innovation (McGuirk et al., 2022). In other words, instead of primarily holding planners and committed citizens supposedly responsible, public discourse should focus on the actors in administration and their professional practices, through which political decisions are prepared, balanced, and implemented. At the same time, conflicts of interest and the conditions of decision-making must be openly addressed and integrated into the routine practice of political-administrative institutions. This points at the matter of organizational learning. For sure, successful co-production also requires the ability to robustly address challenges such as hierarchy and institutional power play, and an interactive, inclusive political approach would also mean sharing power rather than concentrating it.

Thirdly, when science–policy interaction is viewed as a mutual relationship, reviving this association also affects the research side of things, specifically the university. It would be particularly favourable for the academic institution to have a self-understanding that focuses on generating knowledge which is necessarily independent and critical. This should not be misunderstood as a one-sided focus on third mission or other usability claims, but rather needs to be embedded in well-considered research and teaching practice. This seems to be true even when acknowledging that the relationship between those who provide and receive public funding has never been free of conflict or friction. Internal processes and leadership can support a self-conscious habit, enabling the commitment to open speech, impartiality, and innovation even if it hurts. In this context, it is perhaps wise to reiterate the fundamental purpose of universities: standard works in the international discourse, such as Collini's *What Are Universities For?* (2012), provided clear answers to this question, based on a passionate plea for diverse, reflective, and critical science. According to these thoughts, scholarship not only produces professional qualifications, but also provides education and teaches judgement. In order to make this un-

derstanding of research effective, there are also methodological ramifications to consider, given the fine line between collaborative and authoritarian settings in which research methods are applied (Koch, 2013b). This is equally true under authoritarian, hybrid, or simply unresponsive regimes (see Goode, 2010), regardless of recent controversies regarding truth, ethics, and the role of higher education institutions. Instead of cultivating silence, institutions should promote freedom of expression, balanced interactions, and bold encounters between science and policy.

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