

Democracy: Bridging Facts and Norms
REPORT: EVENT 4 / October 20, 2016 / Podium discussion and Apéro
Lecture "Elfenbeinturm oder Arena? Wissenschaft in der Demokratie"

Democracy: Bridging Norms and Facts

20.10.2016
18:30
UZH Zentrum

- 1 Abschlussveranstaltung
- 2 Podiumsdiskussion
- 3 _____
- 4 Elfenbeinturm oder Arena?
- 5 Wissenschaft in der Demokratie
- 6 _____
- 7 _____
- 8 TeilnehmerInnen
- 9 Katja Gentinetta (Gentinetta*Scholten)
- 10 Svenja Goltermann (UZH)
- 11 Michael Hermann (Sotomo)
- 12 Thomas Widmer (UZH)
- 13 _____
- 14 Moderation
- 15 Peer Teuwsen (NZZ)
- 16 _____
- 17 Anschliessend Apéro
- 18 _____
- 19 Rämistrasse 71, KOH-B-10
- 20 [http://democracynet.eu/activities/](http://democracynet.eu/activities/events15-16/)
- 21 [events15-16/](http://democracynet.eu/activities/events15-16/)
- 22 _____
- 23 Organisiert von DemocracyNet.eu
- 24 Mit Unterstützung des UZH
- 25 Graduate Campus
- 26 _____



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Zürich UZH

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Report // October 2016**Facts**

Speakers: Katja Gentinetta (GENTINETTA*SCHOLTEN), Svenja Goltermann (UZH), Michael Hermann (Sotomo), Thomas Widmer (UZH)

Moderator: Peer Teuwsen (NZZ)

Audience: Around 180 persons

Video-podcast: https://cast.switch.ch/vod/clips/13hxoclb09/link_box

Announcements:

- <http://democracynet.eu/elfenbeinturm-oder-arena/>
- <https://www.facebook.com/events/1223141944418166/>

Media report:

- «Wenn man sich nicht zeigt, überlässt man die Bühne den anderen» by Giorgio Scherrer for the UZH History Students' Journal ETÜ, <http://www.etue.ch/?p=556>

Summary of discussion

The final event's main aim was to take a step back towards a meta-discussion in order to question the role of academics and (social) science in democracies. The debate moderated by the journalist Peer Teuwsen highlighted the contrasts between the various perspectives of our guests on, among other things, the following questions:

1. Should academics contribute to debates in the public sphere, and when?

Svenja Goltermann, professor for modern history at the University of Zurich and co-founder of the platform "*Geschichte der Gegenwart*," mentioned her frustration with the media and explained her involvement in public debates by the necessity she sees to raise the 'right' issues in an interesting and fruitful way. The participation of academics in public debates is not about providing solutions. Rather, they should enable the creation of additional "space for reflection" by suggesting new ways of thinking specific issues. Katja Gentinetta, philosopher, journalist and former president of the economic think tank *Avenir Suisse*, argued that researchers should get involved in the media when they see that a problem is not made visible. In addition, she considers that academics asked to contribute to public discussions should aim at explaining issues. The result of their intervention in the audience should be: "Now I understand what this is about!" According to Michael Hermann, director of the survey firm Sotomo, the increasing number of scientific and science popularization blogs shows that there is a concern among academics towards making scientific results accessible to a wide audience. But this might be problematic from the perspective of Thomas Widmer, Professor of political science at the University of Zurich. He actually had a distinct opinion on the whole matter. In his view, academics can contribute to democracy in other ways than by entering public debate and be in the media (as he himself has done three times in 2016 according to the moderator), namely by doing research. Adding to any conversation just for the sake of adding one's own view to the debate as an academic wouldn't help enhancing the quality of public discussions about political issues. Moreover, Widmer distinguishes between the opinions he has as a citizen, and the ones he can share as a political scientist. In the latter position, he feels that he should only talk about what the results of research are and not influence members of the society to vote like him. On the one hand, he avoids in this sense doing what Hermann designates as the behavior of academics members of the SVP who use their position as researchers to make political arguments. On the other hand, he might fail to act in a responsible way according to Gentinetta by handing in dry results to the political sphere without offering any kind of support for interpreting these results. For Goltermann, a further problem with Widmer's position is that, by avoiding intervening in the public sphere, academics also leave the space for others to share their own perspective. Hermann is of a similar view: As soon as some scientists start making political arguments using their authority as researchers in a political system (as, in his view, some SVP academics and elected politicians do in Switzerland), all academics should feel entitled to do it – while keeping in mind that the context should always dictate what is the appropriate behavior to adopt in terms of being objective or subjective.

2. Objective versus subjective contribution

The question whether social sciences and humanities can truly be objective raised a number of comments from the participants. For Goltermann, no scientist can erase their perspective, beliefs, or opinions – even when doing research. This however doesn't mean that science cannot be objective. Rather, the meaning of 'objective' should be adapted to the constraints of history and similar disciplines. Goltermann considers that 'objective' in this kind of research should mean "making justified arguments". But this is exactly the problem for Widmer: His results don't help him to know what opinion to adopt or what to recommend to political authorities. His personal opinion about what to do is not based on his findings, which means that they fail to realize even the minimal standard of objectivity proposed by Goltermann. Yet in Goltermann's view, this shouldn't preclude any researcher from trying to give a wider audience the means to think further.

3. Public sphere and academic career

Another of Teuwsen's questions prompted a lively discussion: How does involvement in the public sphere influence one's academic career? Is there some sort of trade off between engaging in public debates and furthering an academic career? Goltermann remembers none of her colleagues saying something against her involvement in public discussions directly to her. But she could notice that some scientific collaborations have been made more difficult because, probably, of that. Hermann also considers that his engagement in political discussions could have put a brake on a potential academic career, had he wanted to pursue one. Widmer responded that the impact of getting involved in the public sphere on one's academic career largely depends on one's research discipline. In his view, it should be first and foremost a question of individual prioritization. Professors already must realize a lot of tasks: Writing op-eds is only one among the many tasks that they are expected to realize, namely teaching, grading their students' exams, publishing, managing teams, applying for research grants, and so on. Every researcher should thus be able to choose their own priorities among these tasks, without it impeding the transfer of academic knowledge to the wider public through the media. In Gentinetta's perspective, academics should however also take into account the fact that their lack of participation in public debates might have bad consequences – especially in Switzerland in pre-popular vote campaigns, and/or when the interests of academic research are at stake. As Widmer noted, intellectuals benefit from very high trust levels from the citizens, and academics can thus have a positive impact on opinion building processes. Moreover, universities have, according to Gentinetta, a responsibility to share their findings and perspectives with the public. Actually, the legitimacy of the university as a social institution also depends on that.

4. The audience's questions

The discussion was then open to the public, with questions that completed the speaker's debate. The last one of them closed the evening with an essential question: What is the justification for doing science in democracies, and for financing research publicly? The speakers emphasized the intrinsic value of science: While Gentinetta argued that science was an essential part of the human life, Widmer emphasized the need to preserve science from being results oriented only. The discussion continued during the final Apéro in the Foyer West.