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Chapter 1

A professor in search of an identity

Notes on a romantic journey

Gert Biesta

I first became a professor in England in 2002, at the age of 45. I say “first” because, since that first “becoming”, I have become a professor in a pretty wide range of different institutions, countries, and settings. After becoming a professor in England, I became a professor in Scotland in 2007, then a professor in Luxembourg in 2013, in England again in 2015, in the Netherlands in 2016, in Ireland in 2019 and once more in Scotland in 2019. Before becoming a professor in England, I had already become a visiting professor in Sweden in 2001 and again, at a different institution in Sweden, in 2006. I became a professor II in Norway in 2011, a visiting professor in the Netherlands in 2014, once more a professor II at a different institution in Norway in 2018, a visiting professor in Finland in 2020, and then again, a professor II at a different institution in Norway in 2023.

Looking back at this ‘journey through the institutions’ – after Rudi Dutschke one might also call it a ‘long march’ – it could well be concluded that if anyone should know what a professor is, and what it means to be a professor, it must be me! And yet, if this rich and varied experience of being a professor – in different countries, different institutions, with different labels (professor, full professor, appointed professor, promoted professor, visiting professor, professor II), and under different higher education systems – has taught me anything, it is that there is no such one thing as ‘a professor’, even if, as was the case with me, I have been a professor in the field of education all the way through. Put differently: while the word ‘professor’ is used in higher education institutions around the world, its meaning is highly contextualised. This also means that *being* a professor is a highly contextualised matter. Such contexts are not just social, but also cultural, political, legal, and historical, to name the main dimensions that constitute the conditions under which it is possible to exist as professor.

Rather, therefore, than simply stepping into a clearly defined role and identity when one becomes a professor – and even the process of becoming a professor differs significantly in different countries – my attempts at being a professor were just that: ongoing attempts to make sense of what the designation ‘professor’ might mean in such differing contexts and settings. It was, therefore, a search for an identity, far more than simply adopting a ‘ready-made’ one.

Why wanting to become a professor?

It is one thing to become a professor and try to give that role and position some meaning. But before that, there is the question why one actually would want to become a professor. Or, in everyday language: why bother? As for my own ambition to become one, I am still not entirely sure what motivated me or, in a slightly different ‘register’, what the roots of my desire were. With regard to this, it is not without significance that I was educated in the Netherlands but became a professor in England, and perhaps only realised relatively ‘late’ how different these two countries were where it concerned the role and position of ‘the professor’.

I would characterise the academic system in the Netherlands as a highly hierarchical one. In this system, professors – who are appointed to their role, not promoted – are at the top of the hierarchy. They are appointed to what, in Dutch, is called a ‘leerstool’ – the literal translation is ‘teaching chair’ – which denotes a particular area of expertise. Universities have significant scope in deciding which areas of expertise they wish to ‘cover’ with professorships. Professors then tend to have a smaller or bigger group of academic ‘collaborators’ who are responsible for research and teaching (I return to the problems with the word ‘research’ below).

Being a professor in the Dutch system is therefore a powerful position, partly because one is at the top of the hierarchy, and partly because one’s ‘chair’ entails responsibility for a particular area of academic expertise. Although professors are appointed by universities, each appointment is scrutinised by peers in other universities in the country. It is only when they have no concerns about the quality of the candidate that a professor can be appointed.

The question of power is, I think, quite important, and I have experienced both sides of it. On the one hand, I have seen how professors in the Dutch system have had – and still have – significant power within universities with regard to staffing, finances, and also the ‘agenda’ for their field of expertise and scholarship. On the other hand, I have vividly experienced the *lack* of power that came with *not* being a professor in such a system: being dependent upon professors ‘higher up’ in the system for one’s own work, and also for the legitimacy of one’s own scholarship. To put it very concretely: when, in the university in which I worked, the professor ‘under’ which I worked retired, it suddenly became quite – and eventually very – difficult to continue with

the research and scholarship I was involved in, simply because there was no longer a professor 'covering' that work. Other professors were also quite keen to 'claim' the vacant professorship for their own purposes, rather than simply wanting the area of scholarship and expertise to continue as it was.

Perhaps this was one reason for me wanting to become a professor myself, as this would give me the scope for doing the work I wanted to do – in my case, theoretical and historical investigations into education. However, the situation in the Netherlands became so frustrating for me – there was no institutional (i.e., professorial) support for the kind of intellectual and scholarly work I wanted to do, so it felt like the work was under constant threat – that I eventually decided to look for a job in a different country. I thus ended up in England after having worked in Dutch universities for about seven years after finishing my PhD.

A shock to the system

I can honestly say that I wasn't really prepared for academic life in England. I was hoping that it would be a bit better than the frustrating years in the Netherlands, but I hadn't done much homework and was more or less assuming that Dutch and British universities were roughly similar. However, it slowly dawned on me that I had arrived in a completely different universe, not just in terms of structures and regulations, but also in terms of culture and practice. The half-joking story I often tell to describe the difference between the two systems is that I still remember vividly sitting in my new office in England, waiting for someone to come and tell me what I should be doing ... and that that person never arrived! This made me realise, on the one hand, how I had internalised the Dutch hierarchical system – always looking 'up' to someone who is 'in charge' – and, on the other hand, how very different the setup in the UK was, particularly for someone coming from the Dutch system.

From my angle, I found the British university very non-hierarchical and much more 'horizontal' in its ways of working. At first, I wondered how anything could work at all. Then I began to realise that it is also possible to co-ordinate 'horizontally', so to speak, rather than to structure 'vertically'.

A saying that I became fond of was ‘don’t ask for permission, ask for forgiveness’, as it captured something of the difference between the Dutch university – in which everything first needs to be organised and structured before people can start doing something – and the British one – in which I felt that people, by and large, do things and only become concerned about structures and procedures when needed. I am aware that for those who have spent their entire career in British universities this contrast may not be that stark, but for me it was, and still is.

When moving to the UK, I also wasn’t aware that there was such a thing as a ‘promoted professor’ – this was an option that didn’t exist in the Netherlands – so it took time for me to understand that this could actually be a possibility for me as well. I think that by then my motivation for becoming a professor had changed. If, from my Dutch experience, my desire for becoming a professor was mainly motivated by the experience of lack of power, my motivation changed significantly once I began to understand the dynamics and specificities of British higher education.

It was now partly a desire to be a bit more ‘at the table’ of professorial decision-making – although even putting it this way shows that my frame of reference was still influenced by Dutch assumptions, as I don’t really think that there was such a (metaphorical) professorial ‘table’ in the British university. Part of the desire to become a professor also had to do with comparing my own scholarly work with others, which gave me the feeling that, at least with regard to that, I was functioning at the level of ‘a professor’. So I applied and was successful – and am still very grateful to the peers in other countries who reviewed my portfolio and deemed my work to be of professorial ‘level’.

Gaining confidence?

I am not a fan of the word ‘confidence’; it sounds too psychological to me, and I’m probably also not a fan of psychology. But I also think that the word ‘confidence’ has no explanatory power. It is not that someone *has* confidence and, as a result of having ‘it’, is able to do all kinds of things. It is always the other way around: we see some people doing things, or perhaps managing to

do things (or, from the perspective of the one doing all kinds of things, *just about* managing to do things), and we then sometimes say that they seem to be doing it ‘with confidence’, or ‘confidently’, or in a ‘confident manner’. But the use of the word ‘confident’ is always ‘after the event’, not before.

So although I could say of my own activities that I slowly became more confident in doing them, I think it is more that I began to feel ‘at home’ in the context within which I worked. I began to see how things worked, and I also began to see what scope there was for doing things that mattered to me – not so much personally as professionally.

What came more and more to the fore in all this – and for me this speaks to the way in which I slowly began to give meaning to the idea of ‘being a professor’ – was the notion of an ‘intellectual project’ (a phrase I gained from a good colleague of mine). I slowly began to see, and became more and more excited about, the idea that being an academic is not some kind of ‘job’, but has to matter *intellectually*. It has to be about something, so to speak, and this something should in some way matter: to the one doing the work, but also to the wider field within which one situates one’s work.

This is, I think, what it means to have an intellectual project. It is as much about a sense of direction in one’s activities as it is about a sense of purpose: that is, an idea of why, and for whom, what one is doing matters. One could say that it has to do with the justification of one’s activities, which is a tremendously important question, because most universities (still) rely heavily on public funding – although in the UK a significant ‘chunk’ of funding nowadays comes from student fees. I’ve never seen this in the neo-liberal terms of giving taxpayers ‘value for money’, but rather in terms of using public funds in responsible and accountable ways.

For me, this increasingly became centred around a concern for education – often in my writing I call it a concern for education *itself* – particularly in response to many tendencies and developments in and around education that no longer seem to care about the intrinsic value of education, and just want to turn it into the ‘motor’ of the economy, for example.

A friend of mine from the USA (where, by the way, the label of ‘professor’ again has quite a different meaning and status) often said that professors need to ‘profess’, which means that they should have something to say. This is another way to give meaning to the idea of having and pursuing an intellectual project. So for me, over the years working in Britain – first in England

and then in Scotland – I slowly began to ‘fill’ the idea of being a professor in terms of scholarship and intellectual work (which I would never identify, by the way, as ‘theoretical’ as opposed to practical, or of practical significance).

One big question is whether, in ‘modern’ – or contemporary – universities, there is still an opportunity for pursuing intellectual projects. Before I say a bit more about this, I wish to reflect upon one more ‘step’ in my own journey – a step which, once more, highlights the importance of the context within which one can be ‘a professor’.

Context does matter

While it could be argued – particularly when looking from the outside – that I became increasingly better at being a professor, I would argue that to a very large degree this was the result of the conditions under which I was able to do things. Rather, therefore, than describing this in terms of confidence, I would say that there was quite a lucky ‘fit’ between my abilities and the contextual conditions in England and, later on, Scotland.

That it was a matter of this ‘lucky’ fit, rather than my ‘own’ capacities, became clear – again I have to say: frustratingly clear – when I moved out of the context of the British university into a very different academic context, namely that of Luxembourg.

The case of Luxembourg is special because for a very long time the country – which is quite small (about half a million inhabitants, of which only about half are citizens of the country; the rest is ‘import’) – didn’t have its own university. So, when it decided that it wanted to establish its own university, it didn’t have a big pool of home-grown academics, and therefore had to recruit from other countries. It did so quite successfully – also because it had significant resources on offer – by appointing academics from a number of countries, but particularly from the German-speaking world, the Francophone world and the English-speaking world. What perhaps the people establishing the university hadn’t realised – and what, again, I also hadn’t really sufficiently realised before I accepted the post of professor there – is that the German, French and British academic cultures are very different.

And because cultures are often more ‘enacted’ and exist in what are sometimes called ‘unquestioned’ or even ‘hidden’ assumptions and ways of working, rather than being explicit and visible, the university ended up as a rather curious mix of significantly different academic traditions. Moreover, for some reason the German ‘approach’ became quite influential – at least that is how I experienced it – which created a context that was very different from what I had become used to in Britain. Suddenly, I was back in a hierarchical, professor-led academic culture quite similar to what I had experienced in the Netherlands.

And suddenly, therefore, the ‘confidence’ I had gained in the British system – I would say, my ability to navigate the system and function productively and meaningfully – had evaporated. It felt like having to be the professor I didn’t want to be, and also really wasn’t able to be.

There are, of course, different ways to ‘deal’ with such a situation, but for me it became clear that this wasn’t a context in which I was going to thrive in any meaningful way. It wasn’t a context, in other words, in which I was able to be a professor. I thus decided to leave this post in the hope of finding something that would suit me better elsewhere.

At this point, I do want to mention the importance that visiting roles have had for me. One thing about being a visiting professor, or professor II in the Norwegian system, is that it provides opportunities to focus on the scholarly work, and this has been quite rewarding for me. But sometimes it is also more literally a lifeline for continuing one’s academic trajectory – which it clearly was for me.

The rise of the neo-liberal university: From scholarship to research

The foregoing observations are, of course, very much about my personal journey and experience, and it is obvious that someone else going through exactly the same trajectory will have ended up differently, perhaps finding opportunities where I encountered frustrations and being frustrated where I saw opportunities. But what my ‘journey’ does speak to is the fact that what

a professor *is* differs significantly across different contexts and settings. This also means that how one can *be* a professor differs significantly – which is hopefully a helpful insight when pondering the question of being a professor in the 21st century university.

There is one further point I would like to add to my observations. It has to do with the fact that, in addition to the local, regional, national and historical differences, there has also been a rather strong trend running through many universities over the past decades. A ‘quick’ characterisation of this trend is to call it the rise of the neo-liberal university. This is a university that increasingly sees the need to position itself in a more and more global higher education ‘market’, and does so by chasing indicators of prestige and influence. The neo-liberal university is therefore increasingly focused on ‘performance’ and also on ‘counting performance’, so to speak.

I think that my trajectory through higher education has largely coincided with this transformation. When I started out as a student – in the early 1980s – doing a university degree was still quite a lengthy process (in the Netherlands it took six years). Also, obtaining a doctorate was more something someone would do towards the end of their career in higher education, rather than it being an ‘entry ticket’ into it. Many of the academics who taught me when I was a student didn’t have a doctorate, and at the time it seemed as if having a doctorate was a sufficient qualification for becoming a professor in the Dutch system, at least in the field of education.

But quite quickly during my time as a student, the atmosphere began to change. People were beginning to argue that there wasn’t much point in publishing in the Dutch language, and that it would be better to publish in English. Moreover, people started to pay attention to the journals in which one should publish, looking for statistics that would identify which journals would be worth aiming for. Around this, more and more counting of ‘outputs’ – itself a rather strange word – began to emerge and, through this, new hierarchies were being established. It also led to the establishment of new ‘regimes’ of managing – I would probably say: policing – academic careers, focused on outputs and statistics, with increasingly less interest in the content, let alone the quality, of what was being ‘put out’.

Readers may have noted that, so far, I have used both the words ‘research’ and ‘scholarship’, and have actually used the latter word about twice as much as the former. I have also consistently referred to academic ‘work’ – and even the

label 'work' is not without problems – as *intellectual* activity. By highlighting that our 'work' is intellectual and a matter of scholarship, I am trying to push back against the tendency of the neo-liberal university to turn academic work into a matter of productive labour, so to speak; that is, into the production of things (such as outputs, prestige, positions in league tables, citation scores, and so on), rather than seeing it as intellectual pursuit.

In an essay that actually was first published in 1938, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger already warns against the rise of the neo-liberal university, which he characterises as science becoming 'business' (see Heidegger, 1976, p. 347). The transformation of science into business has an impact on what it means to be an academic – and also, I would say, what it means to be a professor. It forms, as Heidegger puts it, 'men of a different stamp', and the main transition he sees is that 'the scholar disappears' and is replaced 'by the research man who is engaged in research projects' (Heidegger, 1976, p. 347). 'The research man no longer needs a library at home,' Heidegger writes, also because 'he is always moving about' (Heidegger, 1976, p. 348). 'He does business at meetings and gets information at congresses. He contracts to work for commissions from publishers, who now help to determine what books must be written' (Heidegger, 1976, p. 348). And 'only in this way does he remain effective and thus, in the sense of his age, real' (Heidegger, 1976, p. 348).

Empty romanticism?

Heidegger is already quite pessimistic about the direction in which these developments are going. He writes that alongside these developments there will continue 'for some time and in a few places (...) an increasingly thin and empty romanticism of scholarship and of the university' (Heidegger, 1976, p. 348). Some would indeed say that this is the reality of academic activity today and that, if there is a future for such activity, and for the role of the professor in it, then the professor needs to adapt to this new reality rather than lingering in an increasingly thin and empty romanticism.

Nowadays I see much evidence of such an adaptive attitude, for example in the way in which students are inducted into academic careers. They are not just being told in much detail how to play the game of publications, grants and indicators of prestige and impact, but are increasingly subjected to what, with an idea ‘imported’ from North America, are called ‘tenure tracks’, in which they have to prove, through an almost endless trajectory of meeting pre-set targets, that they are a worthy ‘research (wo)man’.

What is worrying about this tendency is not just that the game is almost impossible to win, and even to play. If everyone is chasing the same indicators of impact and prestige, it becomes even more difficult to reach any significant point there. Think just about the still-increasing amount of academic publications being churned out day by day, with no possibility for anyone to read everything that is being written. A situation is emerging in which it is no longer people who read but AI that ‘summarises’ what is to be read – which could end up with the bizarre scenario in which AI is both writing academic papers and reading them. What is also worrying is that when this story of what it means to be an academic and, within it, to be a professor is constantly being repeated, it becomes an orthodoxy in which raising any unorthodox questions becomes a very marginal endeavour.

Yet, rather than thinking that being a ‘romantic’ is what any academic, including any professor or any academic aspiring to become a professor, should stay away from as much as possible – so that they can focus on the real business of research – my conclusion, having been around in ‘academia’ for more than four decades now, is that we need more romantics in the university, rather than less. We need more academics who dare to call themselves scholars, and who have the courage to define their work as fundamentally intellectual – which also means that it is always profoundly political, as it will continue to raise difficult, uncomfortable and even unwelcome questions.

If there is a future for the professor, across all different structures, systems, cultures, practices, traditions and histories, it must lie there, and nowhere else. That, at least, is what my journey has taught me and what, in my own – unorthodox (Biesta, 2020) and perhaps obstinate (Biesta, 2019) – way I have been trying to do and will continue to try to do, in the hope that it will encourage others in doing something similar. Professors of the world, I would say, unite!

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