

Money, Tobacco, and our Collective Identity

On April 2, 2007, the Davis Division of the Academic Senate—the voice of the campus faculty—voted, overwhelmingly, to tell the Regents that we are *opposed* to the following resolution:

the University of California shall accept no funds from the manufacturers or distributors of tobacco products, their affiliates, or any entity controlling or controlled by such companies, that are to be used to study tobacco-related diseases, the use of tobacco products or the individual or societal impacts of such use. (Regent's proposal RE-89)

The vote was 1 in favor of the proposal and 47 opposed. I am that 1.

This note will try to put our vote in a bit of context, as I myself find our collective voice to be both troubling and difficult to fully comprehend.

Viewed from afar, RE-89 would not seem to present a challenging moral dilemma. Everyone knows that it is wrong to profit from the death and suffering of others, and everyone knows that it is wrong to lend a hand to an enterprise that willfully kills for profit. I haven't heard anyone try to make the case that we are *not* directly profiting from an immoral enterprise when we accept tobacco money (after all, we are taking our usual 51.5% cut from the folks whose products are currently killing 4.9 million people per year). Similarly, nobody claims that our accepting money from tobacco does not tend to benefit their interests (even if individuals receiving tobacco money are quick to stand up and say that *their* does *not* help tobacco's case).

Most faculty members will grant you *all* of the above; it's not in contention. But they'll insist that, in the end, *it's just not relevant*. Sure tobacco kills 1-in-10 people on the planet. Sure they're not good guys. But we have a something more important at stake. Our *academic freedom*.

In the end, protecting our unimpeachable academic freedom *is* our moral vision. Our 1-to-47 vote eloquently warns the Regents: *do not even think to take away even the most inconsequential bit of potential funding. That money is our birthright. It is the embodiment of academic freedom.*

Forget the sophistry; it isn't relevant. The question I want to ask is: *where is this sentiment coming from?* How could suspect reasoning about academic freedom (and that fearsome slippery slope from which we surely will plunge) trump the flagrant inappropriateness of, say, a UC cancer center not wanting its researchers to take money from Philip Morris?

My sad explanation is that, for most of us, vague thoughts of collective responsibility and propriety simply dissolve in the face of even a distant threat to our perceived rights and interests. The moral imperative that we shouldn't be in bed with tobacco presumes a willingness to conceive of ourselves as a community empowered to make a collective moral choice. Individualistic UCD faculty just won't go there.

We think like this: when I get a grant, it is I who do the work and it is I who make the choices. I decide whom to seek funding from and nobody has the right to stand in my way. Since I act with unimpeachable integrity, nobody can question my decisions. The institutional goals of my funding sources never influence my research directions—if anything, it is I influence theirs.

This kind of thinking, even if overstated in its hubris, is completely understandable. It reflects the cult of individualism that is so valued in the USA and in academia. But in understanding RE-89 as primarily an issue of individual rights one completely misses the broader picture. Faculty do not

accept money as individuals; we accept money as a community. And the mix of money we take in paints a picture of who we are, what we value, and who's interests we will tend to serve.

In the end, our 1-to-47 vote speaks to the primacy of individualism and careerism over all other ethical considerations. It suggests an unwillingness to focus on the social context when issues get uncomfortably close to home.

By accepting money from anyone, we are not being apolitical; we are being overwhelmingly political. The position "we must accept money from anyone, because only the individual should decide what's right for him" is an expression of radical individualism. It is also a socially backwards and highly conservative idea.

Ultimately, faculty reject RE-89 for the same reason that the USA won't ratify the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC): the subordination of social responsibility to radical individualism and proximal economic advantage. Article 13 of the FCTC would likewise appear to prohibit tobacco-company sponsorship of tobacco-related university research.

In 2005, faculty voted to ensure that no center, department, campus, or school could possibly take away any faculty member's sacred right to be funded by anyone:

a unit of the University may not refuse to process, accept, or administer a research award based on the source of the funds; nor may such a unit encumber a faculty members ability to solicit or accept awards based on the source of the funds, except as directed by the UC Board of Regents.
(Resolution of the Academic Senate, 11 May 2005)

With this resolution we became the only university in the world to prohibit academic units from adopting a policy to decline tobacco money. As with RE-89, our overwhelming vote for this resolution (57-to-2 at UCD) embodies the regressive social view that ethical responsibility lies solely in the individual (or with those wise Regents), not in any other grouping we may form.

Since faculty have already declared that only the Regents may refuse money because of its source, why did they even ask us our opinion on RE-89? Perhaps it was a nod towards shared governance—we were, for a change, consulted. Or perhaps they understand where, when some liberal Regent gets feisty, the rest can find their strongest support: in us, the UC faculty.

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