

# The University Before Humboldt and After

Jürgen Backhaus

*This piece is dedicated to my dear friend Moni, who left the room once I had started and returned only after I was finished. I should have told her, that it was a short piece, then she would have given another proof of her patience with me.*

- I. In this article, I want to explore the alternatives to the picture of the university Humboldt presented. Obviously, there was a counter picture, because Humboldt's reforms needed something that was to be reformed. Take the University of Erfurt, which was founded in 1378 and which Humboldt dissolved in 1816, as there were only half as many students as professors at the time. The university he closed was one of the oldest in Germany, founded in 1378, and it is an experience that is primetime in the early renaissance, with Luther for instance proclaiming, if you want to study well, study in Erfurt. Paracelsus had studied in Perugia, one of the oldest European Universities, and he was appointed a professor at the city of Basel, as no university would tolerate his teachings and his abominable Latin. This gives us a hint to university reform looking back, as teaching was also made possible at the university level outside the university. Note this as point 1.
- II. The traditional university also had its own income revenue. This was largely achieved by giving traditional church and monastery revenues to the new universities; a good example is Marburg on the Lahn River. The university is also provided by fees. For instance, Marx earned his doctorate from the University of Jena by paying a fee to the dean. He never appeared for a defense. The universities, composed of students and professors, were thoroughly self-managed institutions, professors and students could be elected as rectors. The University of Erfurt for instance had Amplonius as a student rector, later as a professor rector, he was a physician, and then later a major donor of his precious library. He served as the physician of the archbishop of Cologne and was obviously well paid, since he assembled a very precious library of some 600 scripts which he later donated to the University of Erfurt. Upon his death, a

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war ensued between the archdiocese of Cologne and the city of Erfurt over the library. What a happier reason to fight a war. The city of Erfurt prevailed, and Erfurt prevailed again in 1955, when the library was returned from Russia to Erfurt almost intact. Stalin could not control Latin speakers, and for that reason nobody revealed his ability of speaking Latin for fear of being killed. In this way, no use could be made of it in Stalin-controlled Russia, and the library was returned and is now part of the library system of the University of Erfurt.

- III. It should be pointed out that professorial performance is of course tied to remuneration. In Erfurt, professors were paid for instance by beer brewing licenses. It is no surprise that for a good Erfurt professor it was wise to marry an innkeeper's daughter who knew how to use these licenses. Hence, with long iterations, it is no surprise that Erfurt professors were particularly found in their wives' inns, rather than in the lecture hall, drinking beer with the few students remaining. On the contrary, in Jena, professors lived on the income of the house, as they charged for room and board and use of the library. Hence, professors were got to marrying widows with large libraries that their husbands had bequeathed to them. If under these incentives systems you run two universities next to each other for a long time, you find excellence next to nebulance.
- IV. Several years ago, my teacher Bruno Frey with Rainer Eichenberger launched the idea of functionally organized competing jurisdictions (Frey and Eichenberger 1999). It strikes me as a perfect example of the pre-Humboldt university to describe them as functionally organized competing jurisdictions. The idea of functionally organized competing jurisdictions fits the traditional university that Humboldt abolished, well. The university was a public institution by its own right with citizens as students and professors. Sometimes, we find reminiscence in that some university bestows the honor of an honorary citizen (Ehrenbürger) instead of for instance an honorary doctors degree or an honorary professorship.
- V. What is it that the traditional university before Humboldt holds in this age of Bologna? In my opinion, there are at least three points. First, universities should have their own sources of funding. Second, it is a graceful idea to grant universities the status of semi-states, where students and professors enjoy citizenship which they can transfer in all areas of the Bologna treaty. This would greatly enhance flexibility within the system. Third, granting universities their juridical independence from states and make them states within the states strikes me as a promising prospect.<sup>1</sup>

In this short essay, I have outlined that Humboldt's university reform was not without an alternative, rather obviously, but that the traditional university indeed could serve as a model for a university within the Bologna process.

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<sup>1</sup> Incidentally, this is a demand of Rudolf Steiner (Steiner 1919), who sees such university independence from the state as the solution of the Social Question.

## References

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