

# The University: Idea and Practice

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## 1 Introduction

On May 26, 1988 a dissertation with statements was defended at the University of Groningen, The Netherlands. The first statement (Meijer 1988) by the young doctor—and therefore in his view the most important—was:

The science policy in The Netherlands is pervaded by a spirit of fabrilism, which misunderstands the nature and task of the university, and therefore forms in increasing measure a threat to academic freedom.

A spirit of fabrilism can approximately be described as a technocratic spirit. The term is taken from K. J. Popma (1969, pp. 9–11).<sup>1</sup>

The dissertation—on Neoliberalism (1988)—and the statements were after defense accepted by the Faculty and in this way the present writer became on that day a doctor in the economic sciences.

During my study at the University in Groningen (September 1958 to February 1964) I followed the facultative lectures in philosophy of Prof. Dr. Klaas Johan Popma (1903–1986) (on Friday afternoon for 3 h: 1 h Introduction, 1 h *Capita Selecta*, and 1 h Ethics (four to seven o' clock).

Popma was an extraordinary (*bijzonder*) professor appointed by the private Society for Calvinistic Philosophy (*Vereniging voor Calvinistische Wijsbegeerte*), nowadays renamed as Society for Christian Philosophy. On Calvinist Philosophy: See especially Dooyeweerd (1997), Marlet (1954), and Popma (1956).

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<sup>1</sup> Het wetenschapsbeleid in Nederland is doortrokken van een geest van fabrilisme, die de aard en functie van de universiteit miskent, en vormt daarom in toenemende mate een bedreiging voor de academische vrijheid. Een geest van fabrilisme is bij benadering te omschrijven als een technocratische geest. De term is ontleend aan K.J. Popma, *De universiteit: idee en praktijk*, Amsterdam: Buijten en Schipperheijn 1969, pp. 9–11.

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My statement on the university was inspired by the lectures of Popma, and more in particular by his small booklet on *The University: Idea and Practice* (1969), and my experiences in particular at the University of Amsterdam in the years 1967–1989 (De Jong 1981).

The background of the statement will be discussed in this essay. Therefore, the main features of the study of Popma will be discussed in Sect. 2–4. In Sect. 5 some attention will be paid to developments in science policy in The Netherlands, in the years after 1988, in particular during the time I was employed at the University of Maastricht (1989–2003) and some concluding remarks are given.

## 2 Popma on the University: Idea and Practice

The study was written as a reaction to the note written by Prof. Dr. Kees Posthumus (1902–1972) professor in general chemistry at the Technical High School Eindhoven in his dignity of government commissioner (*regeringscommissaris*) for scientific education on *The University: objectives, functions, structures* (in Dutch K. Posthumus (1968), *De universiteit: doelstellingen, functies, structuren, Voorlichtingsdienst OKW, Staatsdrukkerij te 's Gravenhage.*)

According to the writer (Posthumus) and the Minister of Education (Dr. Gerard Heinrich Veringa, 1924–1999) it was meant as a note for discussion:

“Every form of one-sided pressure for reform would do damage to the essence of the university,” writes Veringa in the Preface.<sup>2</sup>

Although the Minister uses here the term “essence” of the university the brochure is not about the idea and history of the university. It is only on the practice: the objectives, the functions, the structures. Nothing is said about the history and idea of the university. The university is not treated in its cultural context. This is according to Popma the working-method of the *Homo faber*.

The university originates already in antiquity. The history goes back far beyond the late Middle Ages. In antiquity university means *universitas scientiarum*, *the coherence of the sciences*. The medieval university is an *universitas magistrorum et scolarium*, i.e. a community of teachers and pupils. This is the same principle.

According to Popma, the university of today is not a university, but degenerated to a multiversity, and is only administratively united as a bundle of professional schools (*Fachschulen*). It only has the name: university.

Fabrillism is a principle and radical misjudgment of the human nature. The crisis of the university is the degeneration into an administratively united bundle of professional, special sciences. The fabrilist only puts the question: How are you doing that? Not the question: What in the end am I doing? For this last question the student needs to be educated in the history and philosophy of his science, in order

<sup>2</sup> Elke vorm van eenzijdige hervormingsdrang zou het wezen van de universiteit slechts schade berokkenen” (Posthumus, Preface, 1968, p. 2).

not to become a fabrilist. Both questions have to be combined in order to hold free the road for humanity and freedom.

### 3 The Idea of Fabrilism

In order to make the idea of fabrilism more clear, Popma refers to the French philosopher Henri Bergson (1895–1941). Bergson (1941, 12th edition: 91 f) distinguishes *H. faber*, *Homo sapiens*, and *Homo loquax*. He writes:

We believe that it is the essence of men to create materially and morally, to make things and to form himself. *H. faber*, that is the definition we propose. The *H. sapiens* born out of the reflection of the *H. faber* on his production seems us also worth recognition because he solves by pure intelligence the problems. In the choice of problems a philosopher can be mistaken, another philosopher can correct him; both have done their utmost; both can deserve our recognition and our admiration. *Homo faber*, *H. sapiens*, for the one and the other, who have the tendency to coincide, we bend. The only one who is antipathetic is *l'Homo loquax*, whose thinking, when he thinks, is only a reflection on his words.<sup>3</sup>

According to Bergson the essence of men is to create materially and morally. This is explained as fabricate, to make things and to form yourself. He is *H. faber*. What, however, happens here to the word *fabriquer*? First he uses the term create, then it is substituted with the word *fabriquer*. Further he talks about to make things (*fabriquer des choses*) and to form yourself (*de fabriquer lui-même*). The meaning of the term *fabriquer* in the first sense is, however, wholly different from the latter.

The question whether academic teaching is training or education, is according to Popma a false problem. Training has always an educative element; education is always an aspect of training. There is a subject–subject relation not a subject–object relation between teacher and student. Although, it is often tried to treat him as an object, e.g., in slave trade, in slavery, in the military system, especially in war (Popma 1968, pp. 38–43), the free and responsible human being by definition is never an object.

Popma prefers not to use the term essence of the university. He prefers to speak of behavior, structure, own character. He sees dehumanization and demonization in the university of today.

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<sup>3</sup> Nous croyons qu'il est de l'essence de l'homme de créer matériellement et moralement, de fabriquer des choses et de se fabriquer lui-même. *Homo faber*, telle est la définition que nous proposons. *L'Homo sapiens*, né de la réflexion de *l'Homo faber* sur sa fabrication, nous paraît tout aussi digne d'estime tant qu'il résout par la pure intelligence les problèmes qui ne dépendent que d'elle: dans le choix de ces problèmes un philosophe peut se tromper, un autre philosophe le détrompera; tous deux auront travaillé de leur mieux; tous deux pourront mériter notre reconnaissance et notre admiration. *Homo faber*, *Homo sapiens*, devant l'un et l'autre, qui tendent d'ailleurs à se confondre ensemble, nous nous inclinons. Le seul qui nous soit antipathique est *l'Homo loquax*, dont la pensée, quand il pense, n'est qu'une réflexion sur sa parole (Bergson 1941, 91f).

## 4 Can the University which is in Crisis Be Saved and Transmitted to the Future?

Popma turns to the question whether the university which is in crisis can be saved and transmitted to the future. To answer this question he refers to the work of the German philosopher Karl Jaspers (1883–1969), in particular his lectures on *Erneuerung der Universität*, 1945, and *Vom lebendigen Geist der Universität*, 1946, both reprinted in *Rechenschaft und Ausblick*, 1958, pp. 161–173; 186–217.

In the nineteenth century, according to Jaspers (1958, p. 171), the university lost its unity. Moreover the university was unable to include technology into the university. There is no cohesion. There are tensions in the university. He writes on the polarity between theology and philosophy:

The whole of the university, however, in all faculties could live in the deep tension between theology and philosophy, which, both to one and other, in their polarity are allies as well as adversaries.<sup>4</sup>

Jaspers gives theology the highest place in the building of the unified system of sciences of the university. Philosophy gets a subordinate place.

Popma (1969, p. 40) digresses on the relation of theology and philosophy as seen by Aristotle and Augustine. He observes that Petrus Damiani (1007–1072) is probably the first who has used the term: *philosophia ancilla theologiae*. The idea however can already be found in Augustine. Popma argues that this tension can be softened by the insight that there has not to be an *ancilla* (a slave), because this is in glaring contradiction with the idea of the university. Otherwise dehumanization and depersonalization will be the consequence.

In this respect he raises the question of the possibility of the confessional university. When in such a university the primacy is given to a theology than this leads in principle to the possibility that this is the end of the university, because all other faculties are subjected to theology. However, a so-called neutral university has also its confession: neutralism.

Besides this point, four other fundamental questions are also discussed: Self-management, democratization, theory of science and debate on foundations, serious amateurism.

*Self-management (autonomy)* of the university is implied by its nature. However, now *fabrilism* is penetrating the management of the university more and more. The managers are more and more technocrats and not scientists. Most of them are according to Popma “clever boys, they do not care for science” (1969, p. 66).<sup>5</sup>

*“Democratization” (say)*. Students and “lower” staff ask for more influence. They feel that decisions are made over and without them on the form and content of study and research. This is difficult with nowadays large numbers of students and teachers, but a regular discussion between the members of the university community

<sup>4</sup> Das Ganze der Universität aber in allen Fakultäten konnte leben in der tiefen Spannung von Theologie und Philosophie, die, beide aufeinander angewiesen, in ihrer Polarität ebenso Bundesgenossen wie Gegensätze sind (Jaspers 1958, p. 190).

<sup>5</sup> “Veeleer zijn het handige jongens, de wetenschap kan hen gestolen worden” (p. 66).

on the why and how of university studies and research is needed. This means, that is, to say: what today is called say of students, belongs historically and ideally to the essence of the university (Popma 1969, p. 19).<sup>6</sup> The university is a community of teachers *and* students. The system of one man one vote, however, goes too far. It is excluding or in any case diminishing to an unacceptable level the influence of the teachers in the teaching and research process.

*Theory of science and debate on foundations.* Some more or less tinkering on the organization does not solve the problem. Every member of the university has to be open for dialog and to take part in it. This means that by all concerned has to exist lively interest for the building of the *unified system of sciences* and *the question of the place of the own discipline*. This calls for distance to one's own discipline. This debate is possible on the foundation of solidarity between people. The solidarity of people in every field of culture is the foundation on which the university according to its idea is built. They have to behave as human beings and in the idea as well in practice not to allow fabrilitization, depersonalization, and dehumanization.

The unity of the university, which is demanded by her idea, is only possible along the road of *serious amateurism*. The term has as its stem: *amare*, which is to love. The time is long ago that it was possible to be a universal scholar, like for example Leibniz (1646–1716). Even in his case it is doubted that he reached a universal knowledge of science. This is not only the case with regard to special sciences, but also within them. Moreover it is not possible to control everything one finds in the studies of other scientists. Often it has to be taken for granted. Trust belongs to the nature of the university, and related to solidarity, is necessary to make progress.

To get insight in the idea of the university and the meaning of a special science is only possible in amateurish ways. Popma argues that these are not only desirable; they are inevitable.

## 5 Concluding Remarks

The study of Popma gives a profound analysis of the way in which fabrilitic thinking on the university has brought it more and more in crisis since about 1850. The diagnosis leads also to the formulation of correct principles for reform. Four of these principles are mentioned: a unified system of sciences (no hierarchy in sciences, neither theology nor philosophy, or whatever); autonomy (self-management of the university); voice (say) for all persons belonging to the university community; serious amateurism (as counter weight of scientific *hybris*). They can be applied as standards for what is healthy or unhealthy. The standards show the tensions between idea and practice.

The university has to be free from church, state, and any other institution or ideology, and to be autonomous and to belong to the state-free sphere. This was also

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<sup>6</sup> “Dat wil zeggen: wat men tegenwoordig de inspraak van studenten”noemt, behoort zowel historisch en ideeel tot het meest eigenlijk wezen van de universiteit. (p. 19).

the idea behind the Free University of Amsterdam. In 1880, it started as a private association, free from the state and free of the church. However, already in 1905 it became 95 % financed by the state. Now in fact it cooperates with the University of Amsterdam.

In The Netherlands, universities were founded at the end of the sixteenth century, in the time of the Reformation during The Republic. In the beginning of the nineteenth century The Netherlands became a kingdom. The policy with regard to academic education was influenced mainly by the developments in Germany, among them Humboldt. The Dutch politician Johan Rudolph Thorbecke (1798–1872), who contributed to the organization of education in The Netherlands, agreed with Humboldt on the limits of state action with regard to religion and morals. According to Humboldt “particularly all special supervision of education, religion, sumptuary laws, etc., lies wholly outside the limits of its legitimate activity” (Humboldt 1969, p. 69, 81). In the second half of the twentieth century the orientation changed. The German model was, according to De Jong in the 1960s and 1970s of the twentieth century transformed to the Anglo-Saxon model (De Jong, p. 386). Via the supervision of the central state on means and subsidies; the shortening of curricula; open and disguised reorganizations, etc. the freedom of study and research was infringed upon. The situation has further deteriorated since 1988.

There are and have, however, always been niches in the university and there is plenty of room outside the State-controlled universities for independent scientific education and research. There are famous thinkers who never got tenure, e.g. Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677). During the Nazi-period many scientists decided to leave or had to leave Germany (e.g., Wilhelm Röpke). Others did go in inner emigration or were fired (e.g., Jaspers). After the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, Jaspers was considered to have a “Jewish taint” (*jüdische Versippung*, in the jargon of the time) due to his Jewish wife, and was forced to retire from teaching in 1937. In 1938, he fell under a publication ban as well. Many of his long-time friends stood by him, however, and he was able to continue his studies and research without being totally isolated. But he and his wife were under constant threat of removal to a concentration camp until March 30, 1945, when Heidelberg was liberated by American troops. Jaspers wrote extensively on the threat to human freedom posed by modern science and modern economic and political institutions. Jaspers valued humanism and the continuity of integral cultural traditions in political spheres. He strongly opposed totalitarian despotism and warned about the increasing tendency toward technocracy, or a regime that regarded humans as mere instruments of science and ideological goals. He was also skeptical of majoritarian democracy. Thus, he supported a form of governance that guaranteed individual freedom and limited government yet was rooted in authentic tradition and guided by an intellectual elite.<sup>7</sup> Popma himself was appointed by a private society at the fringe of the State University of Groningen and Utrecht.

At October 17, 2003 the present writer had the opportunity to reflect on some experiences during his working life. With regard to the University of Maastricht

<sup>7</sup> Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl\\_Jaspers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl_Jaspers)

he remarked, that thanks to his transfer in 1989 from the University of Amsterdam to the University of Limburg it became possible for him to shift and broaden his area of teaching and research in a new refreshing environment. The experience in Amsterdam as an economist in teaching students in political science and sociology could now be used in the Section Economics of the Public Sector of the Vakgroep Economics in a Faculty of Economics. There it came to a fruitful way of co-operation with Prof. Dr. Jürgen Backhaus. With much pleasure he looks back to the discussions with the participants in the Brown Bag, which gave the possibility during more than 10 years to work in breadth and depth. Not only the input but also the output of the section gave him much satisfaction. Here was done in the field of research and teaching what may be expected of an academic institution. Here his ideal, as expressed in his statements VII and XI (Meijer 1998)<sup>8</sup>, was approached. Parts of the efforts were the Law and Economics Workshop and the Heilbronn Symposium. Both were held in 2012 for the 25th time. They both were organized by Prof. Backhaus.

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<sup>8</sup> The other two statements were: VII. It will be favorable to the development of economic science when a less apposed attitude against historical approaches and reflections on other aspects of reality, in particular the ethical aspect. XI. The point of view that the progress of economic science is fostered by differences in opinion (disagreements) between students (practitioners) supposes a sufficient measure of willingness (readiness) to discuss. From the history of economic science in the twentieth century we find that this is not always present. By exaggerating the differences of opinions the progress can be curbed.