

The normative foundations of research-based education: Philosophical notes on the transformation of the modern university idea

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Abstract The current reorganisation of universities is part of a European policy aimed at strengthening Europe's position with regard to the emerging global knowledge economy. The transformations in view of this overall goal are hardly accompanied by a critical discussion about the function or role of universities within and for society. The common assumption that universities offer a specific 'general education' by linking teaching to research, goes back to the modern university idea as conceived by Wilhelm von Humboldt. This article intends to show that philosophical attempts to restore the modern university model as a normative standard for criticising actual developments at European universities, have become problematic for contextual reasons that beg the basic assumptions of this model. Instead of answering the question of the 'public role of universities', the article rather attempts to clarify the problems with which this question is connected, from a political–philosophical perspective. It is argued that the difficulties in which the contemporary discourse about universities constantly becomes entangled, reflect more fundamental impasses and even contradictions that the modern democratic project is experiencing today.

Keywords Idea of the modern university · Wilhelm von Humboldt · Political philosophy · Link research-education · Marcel Gauchet · Democracy

Introduction

The various reforms and initiatives aimed at restructuring European universities are a response to a number of challenges that universities nowadays have to face, such as: the

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intensification of very specialized research, the steady increase of student numbers, society's demand for professionals with research competences and the political pressure to adapt universities in view of Europe's ability to keep up with the so-called global knowledge economy.

The general discourse in support of those reforms and initiatives mainly focuses on the question of how universities can keep on *functioning* in these circumstances. However, in doing so it seems to neglect the more basic question concerning the *function* or *role* of universities within and for society. The reorganization of European universities is thus not supported by a larger public discussion about this more fundamental question.

Perhaps there is no felt need for such a discussion. The traditional image of the role and function of universities within society might still seem adequate and sufficiently familiar. Moreover, this familiar image is usually considered to be supported by the arguments of famous thinkers who elaborated a modern conception of the university in order to transform the Medieval 'universitas' into a modern institution. If, for instance, we assume that universities offer a 'general education' beyond the prospects of professional training, or if we point to the relation between research and teaching as a distinctive feature of university education, we are at least implicitly referring to the modern university idea as it was conceived by Wilhelm von Humboldt (in the footsteps of Kant, Fichte, Schelling and others).

It is not the intention of this article to expand on the modern university idea (Lenhart 2006, pp. 32–58), nor to comment on its different reformulations by philosophers like Schelsky, Jaspers, Habermas or Mittelstraß (Kopitz 2002; Simons 2006). The purpose is rather to show that any theoretical attempt to restore the modern university model has become problematic for contextual reasons that challenge the basic assumptions of this model. At the same time, however, the context from which these reasons are drawn also reveals the growing need for a norm or a normative idea on the basis of which the current evolutions in the university landscape can reasonably be criticized. In other words, we cannot refute the importance of philosophical attempts to renovate the modern university idea, since any critical evaluation of what is happening to universities today cannot but rely on some account of what universities *should* be and do. Hence every philosophical effort to explicate the normative implications of such an account is surely valuable. However, it is striking that the reformulations made by the above-mentioned philosophers mostly remain inspired by the ideals of the Enlightenment project that also crucially determined the modern university model. The important question is whether these ideals still have enough force to have a practical impact on social life in general, and on the university in particular. Critical evaluations based on a normative model which is no longer appealing are likely to have little effect in changing the praxis they are criticizing. Moreover, they might neglect an important dimension of the evolutions they wish to denounce.

As long as we can still consider the university to be a 'public institution' (Freitag 1995, p. 31), an exploration of the normative foundations of a university education involves an inquiry into the structure and legitimacy of the political collective and its institutions (Renaut 1995, p. 41). Instead of immediately investigating the role of universities in our society today, it is important first to explicate the complexity of this question and clarify the problems with which it is connected. This article intends to offer such a clarification from a political–philosophical perspective. It starts from the supposition that the difficulties in which the contemporary discourse about universities constantly becomes entangled reflect the more fundamental impasses or even contradictions of the modern democratic project.

The first section delineates the general background against which the modern university has emerged in connection with the ideals of a society that is dedicated to the political project of emancipation and autonomy. The second section tries to show that the meaning of the intrinsic link between research and education in Humboldt's university model is thoroughly dependent on the historical context as outlined in the first section. In section three, the evolution of the autonomy project is characterized, in part by drawing on the work of the French philosopher Marcel Gauchet, whose analyses of our current western democracies lead to the conclusion that these modern ideals have completely lost their appeal and capacity to give an orientation for society today. On the basis of these conclusions, the fourth section attempts to understand why the North American university model is permeating Europe and the rest of the world as the pre-eminent example to be followed. The last section proposes a postmodern interpretation of a Humboldtian idea which is evoked whenever universities are said to contribute to the formation of critical, democratic citizens.

The university in transition to modernity

With modernity the religious legitimation of political power is eliminated, together with the theological view that the traditional social order is in accordance with God's will. The state is separated from civil society in which individuals have the liberty to dispose of their consciousness, their labour and their property. The authority of tradition and the monopoly of the church in ultimate questions concerning the meaning of being or the destiny of mankind, are replaced by the authority of Reason alone. The 'reason of the state' (*la raison d'État*), too, is assumed to partake in modern critical Reason, albeit through the mediation of illuminated despots. Henceforth, Reason functions as the new transcendent source of legitimacy, a source that must be appealed to in view of any reasonable justification of the existing order.

In its self-representation every society draws on an orienting narrative that plays a legitimating role by offering a narrative account of the factual social order and of its situation within the larger dimensions of time and space. Such a narrative also contains an interpretative explanation of the differences between social ranks and positions, the origin of laws and uses and so forth. Generally speaking, the modern university became a privileged institution for the elaboration of a new, modern and reasonable account that was meant to replace the pre-modern narrative which was dominated by the authority of church and tradition. Critical reason was supposed to be emancipating by freeing mankind from the bonds of (self-inflicted) domination towards a reasonable autonomy.

The university's contribution to this 'autonomy project' consisted of a free exploration that was liberated from all dogmatic restraints and of the formation of intellectual elites whose reasonable authority should gradually replace the influence of the clergy and the old aristocracy. Education, rather than noble birth, became the new prerogative for taking up public responsibilities that were exerted in the name of reason, to which everyone (potentially) had access by nature. In connecting research and education, or more precisely according to Humboldt's idea, by educating through research, the university nourishes the public debate and enhances the development of an enlightened civic culture. The very idea of a modern public sphere would have remained implausible without the establishment of a modern, public institution which is especially dedicated to research and education on the basis of reason alone. It would also have remained implausible without the guarantee of the

state that this modern university can dispose of the academic immunities and freedoms that are indispensable to carry out its mission.

Collective transcendences in matters of meaning, truth and politics ('God', 'Revelation', 'the King') make place for ideas like 'Nation', 'Freedom', 'Mankind' and 'Civilization'. These ideas also function as ideals by giving an orientation to private and public life and by offering a secular answer to ultimate questions. In opposition to the debt and dependence of men towards their divine creator, the modern ideas and ideals underscore human creativity in all spheres of human life (Gauchet 1998, pp. 13–40). Above the variable spheres of economics and politics, the arts and sciences are represented as belonging to a more lasting 'higher' world of which men can become part when they elevate themselves by cultivating themselves.¹ The high regard of this 'higher' world also has a public and a political meaning that affects the idea of a modern university like the particular German idea that was elaborated by Humboldt (see below).

In France the modern ideals of freedom, autonomy and civilization were fought for with violence against the *Ancien Régime*. The Medieval university—which was a corporation of scholars amongst the other corporations ('universitates') of bricklayers, tanners and so forth—was abolished and the education of the nation consigned to a public education system centrally governed by the state (Renaut 1995, p. 28). Only around 1890 was there a growing demand to decentralize this system and establish universities after the German model with the necessary autonomy to carry out 'pure' science. Whereas England and France were experiencing an industrial and a political revolution, Germany had considerable leeway with regard to its economic and political life. Compared to Western Europe, the *Reich* trailed in respect to industrialization, trade and commerce. An economic bourgeoisie and with it, the formation of a broad front against the old political powers had hardly developed. The German bourgeoisie consisted of an academic *intelligentsia* which was chiefly interested in the higher world of philosophy and arts, and educated public servants who would play the leading role in the quiet and defensive modernization of Germany (Bollenbeck 1996, p. 101). Here, the Catholic church was not—as in France—the dominant adversary from which freedom had to be wrested. Under the influence of Luther, independence from Rome was already enforced and interiorized in the form of a personal consciousness. The Protestant focus on the interior life—clearly present in the work of Kant—was generally combined with a certain disdain of 'exteriority', the ordinary life with its utilitarian concerns. That focus also explained the high esteem for practices intended to improve the development of the moral and spiritual life.²

(Re-)formation through academic inquiry. The university at the border between state and civil society

Like Kant, Humboldt condemned the violence and terror of the French Revolution although he welcomed the ideals in the name of which this Revolution was carried out and extended all over Europe with military force. Like Schiller, he was convinced that a revolution without violence could only come about from below and from within, and therefore should be initiated with the formation of the individual character (Bollenbeck

¹ Any form of education that is intended for a person to become part of this 'higher' world is therefore (still) called 'higher' education. See, Freitag 1995, p. 28.

² Bollenbeck concludes that the German notion of 'Bildung' (education) was unthinkable without the Protestant movement in Germany. See: Bollenbeck 1996, p. 107.

1996, p. 107). For Humboldt, 'culture' was the medium that constituted the link between public freedom and individual formation, even if he shared with Kant and Schiller the critique of Rousseau that modern civilization, and especially the economic entrepreneurial understanding of modern freedom, led to alienation and conformism.

The 'higher' culture that corresponds to Humboldt's ideal of education ('Bildung') accords a richer meaning to the modern idea of autonomy than the economic emancipation that actually came about. In Humboldt's view, 'culture' should include all realizations of the human spirit: language, philosophy, arts and a 'pure' academic inquiry that is exercised for its own sake. Only within a culture that corresponds to the nature of human spirit can the individual properly develop and truly become free.³ The idealistic philosophical systems that provide the concepts and notions of Humboldt's thinking are less essential here. More important is the context in which his ideals of 'education', 'culture' and 'academic inquiry' are effectively diffused through their institutional embodiment in the German university. Humboldt's design for the university of Berlin (1810) is interesting for seeking the difficult balance between dependence and independence, a question that is still relevant for universities today. In view of its autonomy the new institutions should be relatively independent from the state on the one hand, without thereby being delivered to the needs and demands from civil society on the other. After all, the pressure of these demands was significant given the economic and industrial backwardness of Germany with regard to the rest of Europe.⁴

In Humboldt's time, the traditional universities had lost public interest. Most of them were closed and those still open could hardly attract any students. This was mainly due to the rise of the natural sciences and the success of their useful application. The new applied sciences were developed in separate research institutions that competed with the old universities, like the 'Grands Écoles' in France that were established more or less at the same time. The German philosophers were strongly tempted to leave the universities as well and in a sort of counter movement, create specialized institutions in which a continued dedication to pure inquiry would be able to survive. Humboldt resisted the temptation and brought about a distinctive compromise in which the cultivation of 'pure' academic inquiry would also have 'practical' qualities without therefore being immediately 'useful' (Renaut 1995, p. 124). According to his idea, the university becomes a place where research serves only the search for truth and is therefore 'pure' (in the sense of 'not applied' or 'not oriented by the purpose of useful applications'). However, despite—or even thanks to—its 'pure' character, this kind of research also has a practical dimension: it educates the person who is involved in it. As mentioned already, education of the individual is in Humboldt's view the basis for a revolution without violence, for the transformation of society from below and from within.

Humboldt's confidence in the educative value of 'pure' inquiry involves two interconnected features that become apparent in his view of the 'internal and external organization' of the university. In so far as the scientist is supposed to value the disinterested search for truth as an end in itself, his engagement in research is supposed to improve the formation of his character. The central claim of this article concerns the intrinsic link between these terms (research and education as 'formation of character'). The interpretation of these terms has implications for contemporary theoretical attempts to fall

³ The background is a metaphysical 'preformism' in which the subject is thought of as a monad with an inner 'telos' that can be developed when its surroundings are adequate. See; Bollenbeck 1996, p. 346.

⁴ Today the conditions are somehow similar, when European policymakers stress the need to strengthen our knowledge economy in order to keep up with the United States and the former NIC-countries of Asia.

back on Humboldt's university idea as a *normative* critical standard. The link between 'research' (in the sense of 'disinterested search of truth') and 'education' (in the sense of 'moral formation of the character') seems only plausible within the historical constellation outlined above; i.e., a context in which Reason and Truth (as different from dogma and religious Revelation) in combination with the ideals of Freedom and Civilization, are elevated to a 'higher' sphere that henceforth substitutes for the transcendence of God and King.⁵

The implicit meaning of the alleged connection between research and education becomes clear when we look at the way in which Humboldt demarcates the autonomy of the university in view of its aims.

In Humboldt's conception the state may expect or ask no more than an total dedication to pure inquiry from the university. In other words, the state should not hand over scientific research to socio-economic demands for useful and applicable results (although it has the political power to do so). The state must endorse and honour academic inquiry for its own sake and may not tolerate an inquiry reduced to a mere instrument for something else.⁶ The freedom guaranteed by the state constitutes the university as a public institution and affirms its independence from both the state *and* civil society. However, what reasons could the state invoke for creating and financing such an independent institution? To answer this question, Humboldt could refer to the educative value of doing research, a value which has not only an ethical and aesthetic dimension but also includes a political meaning. A comparison with Kant's notion of 'autonomy' can perhaps clarify the latter.

It is well known that Kant links reasonable freedom to the unconditional character of duty; true freedom consists in the fulfilment of moral duty for the sake of duty. Doing his duty for the sake of something else (for instance, bodily needs, a good name or gratitude) would render duty conditional. In connection with conditions, reasonable freedom would become indistinctive from what Kant, referring to Hume, calls 'psychological freedom': a kind of illusion that makes us feel free, although it is completely determined by a complex combination of natural inclinations, desires and mental representations.

The 'pure' scientist, who is interested in truth for the sake of truth (and not for the useful applications of his research) is engaged in an activity that can be qualified 'autonomous' in the true, idealistic sense of the word. In analogy with Aristotle we could say: if people become 'just' only by acting justly and doing justice, they become 'autonomous' only by engaging in an autonomous activity. Free research that is pure in having its finality only in itself, makes the person who is engaged in it free in the true but idealistic sense of the word.

The vicissitudes of the modern autonomy project

In Humboldt's view research at a modern university is principally autonomous, because it is 'pure', and its results tend to be universal because they are not rooted in particular motives or interests. Due to this 'pure' character, university research enhances the

⁵ This hypothesis is sustained by the conceptions of Schelling and Fichte. In their view, the university represents Reason, in the same way as the Church of Peter is supposed to represent the Son; i.e., the incarnation of revealed Truth.

⁶ This requirement seems to confirm that the transcendence of Reason (as the new source of legitimacy) is meant to symbolically safeguard the difference between political (legitimate) power and socio-economic power.

development of personal autonomy, which also has a public significance. Thus, the modern university is the pre-eminent institution that vouches for the universality of reason and knowledge. Its research is the continuous attempt to bring the various results of the many disciplines together in a critical synthesis that is elaborated under the aegis of a regulative idea according to which all knowledge can be composed into a the manifold unity. A provisional conclusion is thus that the public role of such an institution and the educative value of its research are thoroughly affected by the ideals of the modern emancipative project that invoke Reason and reasonable Truth as the new source of all legitimacy.

In the critical tradition of the Frankfurt School to which Habermas belongs, modernity is regarded as an 'unfinished project'. Against the postmodern scepticism of reason in general, Habermas presents his well-known distinction between technical-strategic rationality and communicative rationality. Within this theoretical framework, it is plausible to fall back on the modern university model in order to criticize the current evolutions in our universities. These evolutions, then, deal with the general problems that the Enlightenment project is facing today and that Habermas diagnoses as a crisis of legitimacy. In short, this crisis emerges when the system intrudes on the 'life world' so that social practices increasingly escape the normative regulation that flows from a democratic discussion and become organized by an anonymous logic that is only tuned to efficiency, predictability and control. The normative rationality of democratic discussion should react against this 'colonization of the life world' and regain its advantage over the system. Of course, there is no doubt that in a modern democratic regime, public discussion is the only legitimate basis for a normative regulation of social life. However, it can be doubted whether the motivation for revitalizing this public discussion is still available in the reality of our western societies today.

According to the philosophical analyses of Marcel Gauchet, these motivational sources are indeed no longer available, and he does not conclude that the project of modernity has remained 'unfinished' (Gauchet 1998, 2002). On the contrary, in his view the project of modernity has triumphed and is currently weighed down by the burden of its own success. In simple words, the modern project did not get off the rails because the system marginalizes the normative rationality of discussion. It rather seems that the system prevails because this project has come to a standstill.

The modern political scene was initially a forum for combative struggles about substantial ends and values, where mankind had to reclaim its capacity for reasonable self-determination from the heteronomy of religion and theological politics (Gauchet 1998, pp. 24–27). Personal dedication to public affairs was highly valued. It received its pre-eminent meaning from the *opposition* to traditional authority and served as a source for the search for ultimate answers. Today, the opponent has disappeared and public affairs have thereby lost the elevating meaning of emancipation they once had. The political victory over heteronomy has made the initial ideal of autonomy obsolete. 'Autonomy' is no longer a collective ideal capable of orienting public life or bestowing meaning on it, but has rather become a political and social fact.

Ultimate questions have no public interest anymore, they have been transferred to the individual and have become fully private. Even questions concerning the ends and values of the political collective can only be answered by individuals and at an individual level. The modern ideal of individualism, which was emancipative and internally driven by a desire for personal freedom, has yielded a new kind of individualism which is experienced more as a burden that is externally put on individual shoulders. The energy, the hope and expectations which were once invested in the collective ideal of self-determination and which legitimated the ends and projects of the political collective, have completely

returned to the individual. In Gauchet's view of our contemporary world, it looks like if the politico-juridical fiction of the 'contract' has become practically real. The individual, as a mere natural 'given,' appears as the new source of all legitimacy (Gauchet 1998, pp. 114–446). These evolutions have repercussions for the status of public reason, for the experience of public citizenship and for the way in which particular interests are geared to one another.

Today, we, as 'post-modern' Western citizens, no longer feel any inner obligation to justify our personal needs and demands in light of a universal reasonableness. Instead of appealing to a transcendent Reason, we have only to invoke our own, subjective standpoint, which is considered legitimate on its own terms (Gauchet 1998, pp. 120–140). At the entrance of modernity, the typical citizen was expected, of his own accord, to merge his particular view with the perspective of the collective before entering the public sphere. The ideal of the person was, thus, strongly connected to its public dimension: the typical citizen became truly himself in distancing himself from the contingent features by which he was determined, in order to develop the universal kernel of his being. By distancing himself from his immediate characteristics he could elevate himself to the public standpoint which had a more general validity and allowed him to connect his life with universal values. In short, the typical citizen of modernity mostly became 'himself' by freeing himself from himself. According to Gauchet, western societies today present the other extreme. Whatever he does, the citizen is expected to be himself and remain himself. He is supposed to throw his particular weight on the public scene without making any effort to take over the perspective of the collective and translate his private view into the general language of the latter. The more the political framework of society becomes eroded, the more also the typical modern reference to the public dimension can be neglected. The abstract notion of 'human rights' is increasingly identified with the rights of the actual individual, so that those rights tend to appear as absolute. The sphere of legal recognition in which citizens relate to one another, is ignored in favour of the idea that individuals possess rights by nature.

By the same token, particular interests are no longer expected to be presented publicly as components of a more general interest. As such, in their mere status as givens, they are supposed to be legitimate without any need for further justification by showing how they could contribute to the common good. The latter is considered only as the *a posteriori* upshot of all the particular interests that in civil society compete with one another. This situation can explain the revival of the market model of Adam Smith with the aid of which social life can be conceptually approached and analysed as a 'market society' (Gauchet 1998, pp. 116–120).⁷ To the extremely complex question how individual bearers of legitimate rights and interests can be integrated into a society, the model of the self-regulating market offers an easy answer. Thus, along with the political juridical fiction of the contract, the theoretical fiction of the market model is also on its way to becoming real in practical terms: in almost every sphere of societal life, social relations are treated in terms of demand and offer, of producer or service provider and client. The logic of this model regulates the most diverse practices (such as recreation, health care, culture, education or even politics) and is slowly intruding into the intimate constitution of persons who are increasingly encouraged to be 'managers of a life plan', and end up by conceiving themselves that way.

⁷ In the notion of a 'market society', the market is not limited to the economic sphere in the strict sense of the word. The market is rather considered as being *constitutive* for society as such. According to Smith's theoretical model, all social relations can be approached and analysed in economical terms.

After interpreting the link between research and education in Humboldt's university idea against the background of the modern autonomy project that according to Gauchet, currently suffers the effects of its success, the following section now tries to explain why the American university model is becoming the dominant example for universities in Europe and all over the world.

Professionalism: A 'Postmodern' model for universities?

It is a fact that the course of public institutions like the university cannot be separated from the evolution of society as a whole. On its own terms, however, this fact does not present a sufficient argument for concluding that universities should adapt themselves to societal evolutions or even play an active role in them. Yet the argumentative basis for discussing this question is very unclear. This uncertainty can probably explain the tendency to reverse the 'modern' argumentation. Instead of starting, as Humboldt, from an 'idea' about what universities are and should be and then ask how this could at best be realized in practice, we are now inclined to start from actual developments in society and then ask what universities should be and do in order to go on functioning in these evolving circumstances (Renaut 1995, p. 203).

In today's Europe, the 'function' of universities is mostly described in terms of the European policy of strengthening a knowledge economy that in the future will be able to compete with Asian and North American countries. This so-called 'post-industrial' economy is mainly based on the demand for innovative knowledge which can be applied in the ever faster developing sector of the new information and communication technologies. The knowledge and 'research' that are valued and enhanced in this context obviously have little to do with the idealistic conception of academic inquiry and research ('Wissenschaft' and 'Forschung') on which Humboldt based his idea of the modern university. Nonetheless, the discourse about the current transformations at European universities displays a remarkable continuity with that idea: Humboldt's emphasis on the virtues of linking teaching to research appears to remain surprisingly relevant in the current context (Simons 2006). However, the 'virtues' in this context are connected with the research competences that are highly valued in a knowledge economy. The so-called 'continuity with Humboldt' can therefore only be maintained if we take into account that the German university model has been seriously changed in its transfer to America. In other words, the reference which allows for the asserted continuity is not directly the Humboldtian university model but the American interpretation of this model. So instead of reconnecting to a European tradition, we are re-importing the American version of it.

Until the second half of the 19th century, higher education in the United States was oriented towards the English tradition of 'liberal education' on which John H. Newman in particular left his mark with *The Idea of a University* (1852). This idea suggested that the university needed to focus on teaching more than on research. According to Newman, a university education had an intellectual and moral dimension which ought not to be sacrificed to specialist knowledge and the momentary needs of the professional world (Renaut 1995, p. 211). The American universities created after the civil war on the initiative of president Lincoln turned against the English tradition and looked for an alternative in the German model. However, by focussing on 'professionalism' they gave this model a pragmatic turn better adapted to the American context (Renaut 1995, pp. 214–237; Freitag 1995, pp. 36–44). Before commenting on this turn, it is perhaps

useful to show how the American context to which the German model was adapted, can be compared with the current political situation of European societies as characterized above with the aid of Gauchet.

In America there was no need to seize the ideals of modernity from the traditional sources of authority that were dominating the 'old world'. The immigrants rather imported those ideals in the shape of achievements which for them were as manifest as the 'self-evident truths' of the American Constitution. After independence from the English Crown the question of legitimate government became entirely unproblematic, as long as the state was able to secure the individual liberties and to organize satisfactorily peaceful coexistence. For the American citizen, the political dimension of society did not have the same constitutive meaning for society as it had in Europe, where the modern autonomy project had to be defended continuously against the conservative powers of the *Ancien Régime*. In the eyes of Americans, the state was primarily an administrative organ at the service of general welfare and happiness. It was regarded as an instrumental extension of civil society and its legitimacy flowed from a contract with individuals who were understood to dispose of natural rights and liberties. From the beginning, as it were, the theoretical fictions of the contract and the self-regulating market society were practically implemented in the American way of life.

The idea that 'pure' knowledge should be furthered for the sake of itself, had little meaning in this American context. Otherwise than in Europe, where modern Reason was invoked as a new source of legitimacy in opposition to traditional authority, there was no need to lift up the purity of Reason into a transcendent sphere and then ascribe a normative, legitimating role to it. Hence in its transfer to America, Humboldt's notion of research ('Forschung') lost its elevated content in favour of a more instrumental, utilitarian meaning. The English university tradition in which teaching was more important than research was abandoned in favour of the German model that—because of its specific focus on research—responded much better to society's demand for innovative knowledge with applications in the sectors of industry, agriculture, commerce, management and so on.

From their inception until today, the American universities have played the 'professionalism' card in two ways. Firstly, they have maintained an open attitude towards the professional world and business life in displacing the old focus on a liberal 'general education' towards the improvement and distribution of knowledge with an economic and social relevance. Secondly, their 'professionalism' has also involved the training of professionals with highly specialized research competences. Inside as well as outside the university, these researchers are trained to meet the never-ending demand for technological innovation. By focussing on both aspects of professionalism, the American universities have always sustained the so-called 'professional culture' in which the ideal of the person is almost identified with the concern for a successful career. This culture is now globally exported as the cultural complement of a globalized knowledge economy that has outgrown the old political structures of the nation states. For this reason, American universities are becoming an obvious model for universities all over the world.

On the basis of Gauchet's analysis I have already suggested that the current evolutions in the university sphere are part of more fundamental transformations which Gauchet attributes to the victory of the modern project and to the repercussions of this success for society, its political structure and the legitimacy of its institutions. It is meaningless to welcome these evolutions as a whole, or to oppose them as a whole. A certain degree of 'professionalism' seems unavoidable in order to maintain the democratization of higher education. Nonetheless, a critical normative evaluation of social evolutions in general, and of the university praxis in particular, seems to become problematic *as such* once the

modern collective ideals have lost their orienting, directive and justifying strength. In this situation, few alternatives remain. Either we give up the ambition to reach an overarching critical standpoint, which in any case few are still inclined to defend after all the objections against the universal pretensions of modern critical reason (Honneth 2000), or we remain—although in a somewhat vague manner—concerned for a normative critical perspective for which we can only fall back on the memory of tradition, a memory in which modernity forms the most recent tradition.

Without seeing the modern project as ‘unfinished’ and thereby as waiting for ‘fulfilment’, we can recall that the modern university was dedicated to a kind of knowledge that beyond all useful effects *also* had a symbolic function which is irreducible to one of these effects. This symbolic meaning becomes manifest in the requirement that research *also* be cultivated for the sake of knowledge *as such*, as an end in itself. Discussing Humboldt’s conception of the modern university above, I have argued that this requirement was (probably) connected to the substitution of a transcendent universal Reason for the religious fundament from which the legitimacy of all knowledge and power flowed in pre-modern society. Like the ‘cosmos’ in antiquity, modern Reason functions as a guiding principle that is normative for a theoretical approach of reality as well as for practical life. Human reason can take part in the transcendent sphere of Reason, but the *telos* of truth—considered as a correspondence between human thinking and the (intelligible) structure of reality—remains always transcendent with respect to the momentary results of research. According to Gauchet’ there seems to be a certain continuity between the mythical-religious world and the Western modern world: in both worlds society has represented the normative standards for human action and thinking as coming from *elsewhere*. These standards were cultivated as belonging to another dimension that partially escapes the human grasp since it always transcends the actual here and now.

With regard to the idealistic, metaphysical background of the German university model, we can easily admit today that ‘research’ (‘Forschung’) in Humboldt’s conception was ultimately focussed (focused?) on the question of the ontological status, the ‘reality’ of what transcends the human grasp. Today we would rather say that metaphysical questions of this kind are deeply rooted in human ‘existence’, a mysterious openness on being of which we shall never unearth the origin without supposing it already. In the Western world (and setting aside ‘intelligent design’ theories) we no longer lean towards realistic interpretations of transcendence. Perhaps this is the most important difference between modernity and postmodernity. (However, a symbolic reference to this transcendent dimension, to an ‘exterior elsewhere’ of society and its inter-human relations, remains nonetheless crucial for the preservation of a democratically based human space of meaning.) However, a symbolic reference to ‘transcendence’, to an ‘outside’ of society that escapes the grasp of human knowledge and control, and symbolizes the lack of answers to ultimate questions of meaning, seems crucial for the preservation of democracy. In the same line, and according to his analysis of totalitarianism in the 20th century, Claude Lefort has characterized modern democracy as the political regime in which political power is represented symbolically as coming from an ‘empty place’.

In order to illustrate the importance of that reference and to ask which role the university could play in upholding it, let us briefly examine the somewhat gloomy analysis of Michel Freitag whose ‘Le Naufrage de l’Université’ (The Shipwreck of the University) (1995) draws particular attention to the *tendencies* in the evolution of universities together with contemporary society.

‘Research’ and saving the ethical question

The way in which universities deal with ‘research’ is dependent not only on objects and methods; it also diverges along with what we generally understand by ‘research’ and with the aims that society connects with research. The specific meaning that currently dominates the notion of ‘research’ has little to do with the autonomous, intellectual activity that is dedicated to truth and to a critical investigation of reality. Even if we still assume that all research—as long as it respects the indispensable methodological rules—adds to the cumulative development of science, the relation with truth is not essential anymore. In the current meaning of ‘scientific research’ the efficacy of the results and their applications have become the primary criterion. Results are estimated according to their capacity to realize specific ends and to inscribe these implementations into a ‘reality’ that increasingly appears as the artificial outcome of all technological achievements which make this reality what it is. The idea of a ‘reality that exists in itself’—which formed the basis of modern science—echoes today only through the contingent obstacles that slow down the implementation of pragmatically selected research ends. In short, the old criterion of truth gives way to an efficacy that is measured by the capacity to ‘create’ reality, as well as to predict and control it.⁸

Together with the weakening of political structures, society is evolving towards a self-regulatory social system that is unfolded in a multiplicity of subsystems. In the sense of Luhmann’s ‘reduction of complexity’, each subsystem continuously needs to adapt itself actively to the complex, dynamic and unpredictable environment that consists of all the other subsystems. With regard to the internal organization, as well as the planning and regulation of such a subsystem, there is a permanent need for new knowledge about the ever-changing features of the environment. ‘Research’, then, becomes a crucial requirement for the system to keep on functioning (Freitag 1995, p. 50). According to Freitag, this evolution (of which he admittedly only indicates a *tendency*) is exposed to a fundamental *aporia*. Up until now, society has been able to fall back on reservoirs of symbolic and normative meanings from which public discussions could draw in order to fulfil its democratic, legitimating role. These reservoirs, though, are *not* reproduced nor revitalized by the system because of the typical ways in which the system operates.

If it is therefore justified to speak of a crisis in the social realm then the problem is not so much a threatening ‘disintegration’ that should be countered by overarching norms and values,⁹ but rather a totalizing transformation of the social realm into a system. The question with which Freitag’s ‘aporia’ confronts us, is apparently the following: for how much longer can a critical social theory (and society itself) still presuppose the existence of a critical democratic culture, and appeal to it for the implementation of remedies suggested by its critical diagnoses? Or if we put in the terms of Habermas: for how much longer can we realistically invoke a critical ‘life world’ in order to oppose the intrusion of a system with normative discussions? Gauchet’s analyses confront us with an even more difficult question: is it possible that the transformation of the social realm into a social system is the only alternative for a ‘life world’ in which the modern emancipative élan and the source for critical debate has almost completely dried up?

⁸ It goes without saying that this prediction and control will succeed all the better, when the ‘environment’ is itself the outcome and product of technical manipulations.

⁹ According to Axel Honneth, a disintegration of the social realm can only be countered by the strengthening of a democratic solidarity that has to rely on the common reference to overarching norms and values. See: Honneth 1994, pp. 274–287.

The most threatening aspect of a social system presumably lies in its capacity to create an 'inhuman' environment that nonetheless can function perfectly because of its technological smoothness. Though the system has emerged for an efficient regulation of specific practices (by avoiding never ending discussions), it is principally capable of regulating *all* human affairs and even of predicting and controlling the revolts it raises against it. Habermas' diagnosis of a 'legitimacy crisis' somehow neglects the implication that the system apparently has an extraordinary aptitude for legitimating itself. The legitimacy of technologies that are designed in order to organize and govern social life seems, as it were, to match their immediate efficiency. If the notion of a crisis is usually linked to a structural incapacity to solve certain problems, we can hardly speak of a crisis in this case. Rather, we should be warned that the system is *too good* at solving problems and for that reason it has a titanic capability to integrate the social realm. Its particular legitimacy is apparently connected to that capability.

Only a value judgement enables us to take a critical distance from the often heard argument that universities should adapt themselves to socio-economic evolutions and should therefore adjust their research work to what society needs and demands. Instead of shunning value judgements for seeming merely 'subjective', we have to do justice to the difference between a value judgement on the one hand, and a subjective preference on the other. However, in order to maintain this difference, a value judgement requires arguments and shared criteria on which these arguments can be based (and the fact that people can affirm or reject these criteria supposes already that they are 'shared' somehow). The only sources for finding and sharing such criteria are the above-mentioned reservoirs of meaning that are symbolically reproduced, and will last only as long as they are actually reproduced. Values and ideals are fragile realities: they are completely dependent on the institutions that incorporate them and give them a public presence. Here lies the difference between institutions and organizations. The institute *makes* the existence of those aims and values that it is supposed to serve, and in this sense the institute is self-referential. The organization on the other hand, belongs to the area of means and *must* give priority to an efficient administration and employment of those means. The difference between them is blurred when the organizational efficiency becomes a decisive finality, when Efficiency becomes a value on its own and is absolutely (i.e., independent from any other value) elevated to similar heights as Reason in modernity.

Conclusions

In a democratic culture, where public debate is the only source of legitimacy, philosophy has no privileged access whatsoever in disclosing the 'higher' values and ends for society and politics. However, philosophy can clarify the importance of a symbolic reference to such values and indicate what is at stake when that reference is abolished. As a human reality, the existence of society is crucially reliant on an ethical, normative dimension. A systematic denial of this feature appears to be both the cause and the effect of an evolution in which public institutions are turned into organizations and in which society tends to be transformed into a social system. In this context it would be implausible to suggest that universities should still stand in for the substantial values and ideals of a modern project that was meant to enhance the civilization of mankind. However, in a formal sense, universities could still stand in for the 'value' and the maintenance of an ethical normative dimension that a democratic society needs in order to represent and approach itself in a critical light.

As long as the university remains a public institution and does not completely take the shape of an organization, it could play a civic role—not directly in cultivating substantial values—but rather in recalling a crucial *question* which, for society, represents a value in and of itself. This question asks for the elementary conditions that have to be safeguarded in order to secure the possibility of a normative-critical perspective on what is actually happening in society. Beyond and irrespective of all its other motives and objectives, university research in the fields of humanities and sciences, should *also*, and at least obliquely, contribute to the never-ending enquiry into this question. Perhaps this formal proposal could offer a postmodern interpretation of the modern idea that university research is ‘educating’ by being engaged in a questioning the value of which is important in itself and not dependent on something else. Only with such an interpretation can we today justly maintain the common statement that a university education somehow contributes to the preservation of a critical democratic culture.

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